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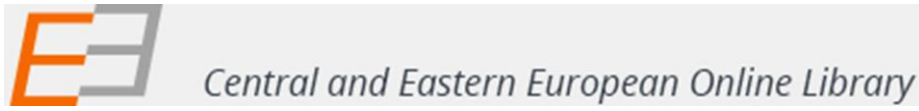

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SRPSKA AKADEMSKA MISAO
SERBIAN ACADEMIC THOUGHT

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES – AN INTRODUCTORY REVIEW TO CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

Miroslav Popović [1]

***Abstract*:** The paper is an attempt to summarize contemporary research results on theoretical concepts of conspiracy theories. Author has analyzed theoretical aspects from the viewpoints of political theory and theory of history, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. One of the goals of the paper is to connect the determinism that is at the heart of Western Christian European civilization with the emergence of conspiracy theories. Two parallel phenomena at the center of today Western cultural logic may be observed: the need for an explanation derived from the world view brought about by theological determinism and, on the other hand, in the spirit of the "post-truth" era, the need to liberalize science and free it from the "dogmas" that, according to some, are imposed by scientific institutions.

***Key words*:** conspiracy theories, theoretical frameworks, social sciences

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the concepts of conspiracy theories from the perspective of social sciences. This perspective concentrates on defining the term itself, which is very demanding and layered, then, on the mechanisms of emergence of conspiracy theories and the principles of their manifestation, action in a modern society, on their effects and possible consequences. Also, researchers from social science fields look at conspiracy theories from an epistemological point of view, that is, whether in their essence is a need for an explanation and whether conspiracy theories should be rejected or carefully analyzed and in certain, specific cases, trusted. Or, on the other hand, theoretical conspiracies are strategic narratives, which are created in order to achieve political, marketing and other goals of certain interest groups, and, finally, it should be stated that in the essence of belief in conspiracy theories lies a deep distrust in official institutions and their attitudes, including scientific ones, brought about by a post-truth society. This paper will consider the views of various authors on the nature of conspiracy theories, how they can be defined, what are the principles of their origin and how they manifest in a society, why

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people believe in conspiracy theories, the problems of the post-truth era and populism, which are key to understanding the concept of conspiracy theories in today's society. Conspiracy theories understood as strategic narratives will be considered, i.e. when political and other actors construct an understanding of the past, present and future in order to achieve their political, marketing and other interests. In this sense, the case of Nazi Germany, which based its entire social system on the nurturing of conspiracy theories, with catastrophic consequences, will be cited, and some of the concepts of conspiracy theories in the historical past will be briefly presented, and they can be followed to this day. Likewise, the ideas of contemporary authors will be presented on whether and in which cases conspiracy theories can be trusted, should they be completely rejected or only given some kind of legitimacy; how to react to conspiracy theories and whether to react at all. The author will also very briefly look at the interpretation of conspiracy theories within the framework of the folklore genre. At the end of the paper, the ideas of theological determinism, which can be considered the basis of the cultural logic of European man, and the views of Karl Popper, who sees determinism as the enemy of the rationality and objectivity of science, and of rational behavior in general, will be linked. Also, within the post-truth era, the need of European societies to liberalize science and free it from determinants, which, according to some, are dictated by scientific institutions, will be emphasized. European civilizational and cultural influences have been transferred to other parts of the world throughout history, primarily the USA, also in terms of conspiracy theory concepts, which are quite dominant in that area.

Theoretical concepts of conspiracy theories: contemporary research results

In the *General Introduction* that Michael Butter and Peter Knight wrote as co-editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, authors paraphrase modern definitions of conspiracy theories made by Geoffrey Cubitt and Michael Barkun in historical and political context: „According to historian Geoffrey Cubitt, conspiracy theories are a way of making sense of current events and the grand sweep of history that is characterised by intentionalism, dualism and occultism. They assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals. Political scientist Michael Barkun highlights similar characteristics in his influential definition of conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected“ (Butter, Knight 2020, 1). Katharina Thalmann emphasizes Barkun's three concepts of conspiracy theories. By *intentionality* Barkun means that conspiracy theories are a product of human design, will and intention. The second concept, the one of *secrecy and deception*, is based on the activity of the conspirators that are organized to decieve others with the aim to dissable people not in the conspiratory circle to see the obvious. Finally,

causality and correlation in the terms of conspiracy theories are concepts that deny the possibility of coincidence and form connections between seemingly unconnected events in the past and present (Thalmann 2019, 2).

During the 19th century, to "develop" a "conspiracy theory" became synonymous with a line of argumentation that presented a hypothesis which could either be validated or refuted. Conspiracy theories also entered the terminology of forensics since journalists, police officers, and detectives investigating crimes showcased a readiness to build compounds linking a specific kind of crime to the term theory. As an explanation in criminal justice and forensics the phrase "conspiracy theory"continued to be used until well into the 20th century. „It was in the early Cold War period that the term developed another semantic strand which carried a distinctly pejorative connotation and intellectuals began to question whether the term 'theory' was adequate. Since then, the term has come to connote an antiquated worldview, a pathological belief system, or, as one journalist phrased it in the 1970s, 'an ideology, a haphazard theoretical system structured around a network of conspiracies'" (Thalmann 2019, 26-27). Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1952) describes and criticizes what he refers to as the "conspiracy theory of society". In *The Age of Reform* (1955), Richard Hofstadter intermittently makes use of the term which is, quite tellingly, listed under "conspiratorial manias". A 1956 article on conspiracy theorizing in *Harper's Magazine* (Rovere, "Easy") and the various dissertations which dealt with conspiracy theories in the 1960s are also indicative of the term's mainstreaming. In 1983 the term appeared for the first time in the title of a scholarly publication, in *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics* by George Johnson (Thalmann 2019, 27). As the first phase or the beginnings of conspiracy theory as a research subject may be considered research published between the 1930s and the early 1950s and can be seen as a reaction to the rise in totalitarian regimes in Europe. As the second phase may be regarded research and texts at the height of anti-communism during the Red Scare in the mid-1950s. The third phase starts in the early 1960s and can be followed to the mid-1970s when, above all, consensus historians and pluralists denounced conspiracy theorists as the members of a paranoid, extremist fringe of society and politics (Thalmann 2019, 28).

According to David Coady, a conspiracy theory, on the one hand, is simply a conspiratorial explanation, and presumes that group of agents work together in secret, often, but not always, with inauspiscious purpuse. On the other hand, „a conspiracy theory is an explanation that is contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question", and it will always compete with non-conspiratorial version of events. The author argues that both definitions overlap in a great extent (Coady 2006, 2-3). Coady states that „the bad reputation of conspiracy theories is particularly pronounced amongst conservatives, who tend to think of conspiracy theorizing as an activity of the

extreme Left“, and, on the other hand, „conspiracy theorizing is indisputably an activity of the extreme Right“ (Coady 2006, 3-4).

Karl Popper, writing in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, defined the aims of the conspiracy theory of society and of the social sciences as opositte. Conspiracy theories present “the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon, and who have planned and conspired to bring it about”. According to Popper, conspiracy theories are based on the claims that missfortunate events in a society are designed directly by the powerful (Popper 1977, 94-95). Rethinking Popper's definition and going further, Didier Fassin says: „this definition surely contains some of the core elements of conspiracy theories: the causal reasoning (’explanation’), the systematic quest (’whatever happens’), the intentional process (’planned and conspired’), the secret dimension (’discovery’), the unpleasant consequences (’dislike’), and finally, the ’design’ by ’interested’ and ’powerful’ people. In addition to these six analytical characteristics comes a crucial normative one, which is the falsehood of the theory (’mistaken’), which Popper insistently denigrates“ (Fassin 2021, 129).

Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeulle consider two challenges in connection to the conspiracy theories. First, understanding mechanisms that provide success of these theories, and the second is to understand how to debunk such theories. Self-sealing quality of conspiracy theories can be seen in the fact that it is very hard to persuade conspiracy theorists by attempting to dispel theories they stand for and that very attempt may be considered as a proof of the conspiracy. Authors urge that the best way to respond to such theories, that suffer from a „crippled epistemology,“ is to make cognitive infiltration of extremist groups (Sunstein, Vermeule 2008, 1).

Robbie M. Sutton and Karen M. Douglas point out the powerful role of conspiracy theories in processes considering ideological context. Connection of conspiracy theories with ideological extremism, distrust in the ideology of the oponent side, following the populist distrust of mainstream politics, is evident. Ideological significance of conspiracy belief is a feature of a „conspiracy mindset“. This „mindset“ is in connection with „measuring conspiracy belief by means of abstract propositions associated with aversion and distrust of powerful groups“, but, there is also, as an important factor, the nonrational character of specific conspiracy beliefs. This factor may increase the risk of mischaracterising conspiracy beliefs and, consequently, their ideological implications (Sutton, Douglas 2020, 118).

Describing strategic conspiracy naratives, Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel define concepts of semiotic conflict, information conflict, strategic narrative, semiotic logic of conspiracy theories and many others, considering conspiracy theories as strategic narratives, and this notion implies “a means by

which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (Madisson, Ventsel 2021, 4). Authors point out strategic use of conspiracy narratives in the discourses of politics, marketing and alternative knowledge, asserting the strategic core of conspiracy theories. Audience and the targeted readers are being shaped by a certain mode that is based on the characteristics of the conflicts. The construction of these conflicts as the conflicts between „the own" and „the alien" may be observed. Conspiracy theories often attract attention and outbreak reactions in the targeted audience, causing „cascades of sharing on social media against the background of contemporary information overload". The aim of strategic disseminators of conspiracy theories is to construct a message that is considered urgent by the audience and seems to need its immediate reaction (Madisson, Ventsel 2021, 4-5).

It should be pointed out that social psychologists try to use quantitative methods to solve the problems such as why some people believe in conspiracy theories and others don't. In this way, social psychology is also interested in effects this beleiving or not beleiving in conspiracy theories might have on contemporary societies. The relation between enviromental factors, for example, social status and education, and the belief in specific conspiracy theories is also being considered by social psychologists, the same way as the consequences of the such belief, so they highlight its dangers and try to find ways of debunking these theories (Butter, Knight 2020, 5-6).[2] Researchers try to explain various functions that conspiracy theories had in different historical moments and multifarious regional contexts; also, the political role of conspiracy theories in the history of certain countries and regimes. These theories took different cultural forms (Butter, Knight 2020, 6-7).

Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Asprem stand for a point of view that „conspiracy theories have had a long presence in Western culture, often responding to anxieties caused by rapid social, political, or religious transformations. In the modern period, moments of extraordinary change such as the French and Russian Revolutions have inspired the creation of a plethora of conspiracy theories, attributing agency to mysterious and powerful secret societies" (Piraino, Pasi, Asprem 2023, 1). On the other hand, „the concept of 'post-truth', selected as word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, pairs with conspiracy theories, describing a fragmented public sphere where competing narratives and political discourses cannot even find common ground about the most elementary social and political facts. A post-truth narrative focuses on belief and emotion, challenging factual analysis. While the notion of post-truth may be new, the idea that truth is fluid, and fact and fiction are

[2] These aspects are also a research field of Serbian psychologists, as the work Petrović 2019.

intertwined[3], will be familiar to anyone who has been researching conspiracy theories“ (Piraino, Pasi, Asprem 2023, 1). Authors point out that conspiracy theories are entertaining and being spread by books, movies and media in wider sense. Also, there is a deep connection between the arts and conspiracy theories. In that sense, Titus Livy's account of the Bacchanalian conspiracy follows a number of conventions seen in ancient Roman comedies. Elements of conspiracy theories, that have transhistorical and transcultural character, are the fear of mind control, the fear of harming children, then, following, the fear of undermining moral norms considered as fundamental in certain societies and the fear of social and political change (Piraino, Pasi, Asprem 2023, 3, 5). One can see these common places, including sexual deviations and abuses, ritual killings of innocent children, in examples such as the Bacchanalian affair in ancient Rome 186 BC, in England in the 12th century with William of Norwich, in Italy in the 15th century, when the case of Simon of Trent is considered. There is also a fruitful soil for conspiracy theories, as a reflection of the fear of social and political change, arround the French Revolution or the famous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that were published in Russia in 1903 and considered an alleged Jewish conspiracy against traditional society. Though it was quickly proven that the text is a forgery, the „imagination, a desire to believe, and political drive were essential“ (Piraino, Pasi, Asprem 2023, 1, 5).

Jovan Byford opens up a series of questions, aiming to explain conspiracy theories: „What are the defining characteristics of conspiracy theories and their rhetorical style? How does one differentiate conspiracy theories from legitimate inquiries into real conspiracies in politics? How long have conspiracy theories been around and to what extent are contemporary versions similar to those of yesteryear? Why do conspiracy theories sound alike and what ensures their persistence in modern society? Why do some people believe in conspiracy theories while others do not? Are conspiracy theories necessarily bad, or does

[3] Considering mixing facts and fiction in anthropology and etnography and questions of objectivity and subjectivity, „Clifford Geertz once contrasted the art of fiction with the craft of 'faction', a type of writing that wrapped social scientific truth claims in polished and accessible prose. Ethnographic monographs once enjoyed popular audiences because earlier generations of scholars were committed to writing ethnographic texts that were as beautifully written as they were analytically incisive“ (Ghodsee, Kristen, 2013, „Writing Etnographies that Ordinary People can Read“, *Anthropology news*, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/kristenghodsee/files/writing_ethnographies.pdf).
Revisiting concepts such as Clifford Geertz 'thick descriptions' and 'faction' some authors „suggest that ethnographic fiction is part of a tradition in ethnographic work that problematize the division between fact and fiction, reason and affect, as well as objectivity and subjectivity. Scholars that work in the ethnographic tradition has long since acknowledged researchers' interpretations and subjectivity as a part of our knowledge production. Qualitative research in general, and ethnographic research in particular, would be impossible without an active research subject that thinks, feels and engages in the field of research“ (Ingridsdotter, Silow Kallenberg 2017, 2-10).

the distrust in government and mainstream institutions which they invariably perpetuate harbour a progressive potential?“ (Byford 2011, 6).

The same author argues that: „Defining conspiracy theories is not as straightforward as it seems. In everyday conversation, ‘conspiracy theory’ is not a neutral term. To refer to an explanation as a ‘conspiracy theory’ or its exponent as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ implies criticism and alludes to a tendency towards faulty reasoning, irrationality or political bias. At the same, plots, collusion and cover-ups are a regular feature of contemporary politics, which means that a theory about a conspiracy might be a perfectly reasonable view to hold“ (Byford 2011, 17-18) Byford also discusses „how legitimate analyses of secrecy and collusion in politics might be differentiated from conspiracy theories“. Tracing the origins and the history of conspiracy theories, Byford finds its roots in the aftermath of the French Revolution, analyzing the social, political and cultural factors. In the 19th century European conspiracy theories were incorporated into the American political culture, and the antisemitic motifs occured, because antisemitism and conspiracy theories have been transferred from Europe to the USA. The fear of the „enemy within“, together with the fear of external threat, marked conspiracy theories in the early 20th century, following the changes in the conspiracy culture after World War II. In this way, Byford treats and indentifies continuities and discontinuities of the development of conspiracy theories and points out that they are remarkably similar, with „a distinct narrative structure, an internal logic and a set of recurring motifs“ (Byford 2011, 18). The author also „calls for the distinction to be preserved between, on the one hand, conspiracy theories as a tradition of explanation and, on the other hand, the more general discourses of suspicion, cynicism and irony which permeate modern society. It argues that the failure to preserve such a distinction not only leads to conceptual confusion, but also implies that conspiracy thinking might be acceptable or inevitable, thereby instilling it with legitimacy“ (Byford 2011, 19).

Matthew R. X. Dentith delivers an important question: „When, if ever, is it rational to believe a conspiracy theory?“ Author presents following arguments, defending such beliefs: „A defence of belief in conspiracy theories as long as you can tell a good story about why particular conspiracy theories are likely to be warranted“ and „A defence of the view that the fact that some theories are conspiracy theories is not itself a reason for rejecting them“. As Dentith puts it: „A proper understanding of how we answer such a question shows that it is sometimes rational to believe *particular* conspiracy theories“. Also, „sometimes the evidence used against particular conspiracy theories ends up being what is called ‘disinformation’: fabricated information put forward to either discredit some explanatory hypothesis or to make some other explanatory hypothesis look plausible. Occasionally the evidence used for or against some conspiracy theory is selective in character: the evidence has been manipulated in order to make it support some explanatory hypothesis. Some evidence, for or against a

conspiracy theory, might even be fortuitous, in that the evidence turns out to be too good to be true“ (Dentith 2014, 3-6). Dentith also explains that when one looks at the field of views about the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories there are two opposing camps, the generalists and the particularists. The generalist view assumes the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories, regarding conspiratorial thinking as itself irrational. The particularist view about conspiratorial thinking denies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories. Dentith believes that generalist view offers pejorative definition of conspiracy theory and that that we should be particularists (Dentith 2014, 32). Lee Basham gives the folowing opinion considering how should we respond to conspiracy theories: „I suspect we should respond, ironically, by not responding at all. [...] In the present civilizational system decisive epistemic rejection of many prominent conspiracies cannot succeed. [...] *There is nothing you can do*. [...] The futile pursuit of malevolent conspiracy theory sours or at least distract us from what is good and valuable in life. Squinting at the increasingly imperial edifice of global civilization and wandering *what's really behind all this?* gets us nowhere“ (Basham 2006, 74). Charles Pidgen argues that it is sometimes permissible both to investigate and to believe conspiracy theories. He continues: „hence this is a dispute in the ethics of belief. I defend epistemic 'oughts' which apply in the first instance to belief-forming strategies which are partly under our control. But the belief-forming strategy of not believing conspiracy theories would be a political disaster and the epistemic equivalent of self-mutilation. I discuss several variations of this strategy, interpreting 'conspiracy theory' in different ways but conclude that on all these readings, the conventional wisdom is deeply unwise“ (Pidgen 2007, 219). Didier Fassin argues that anthropologists, taking in consideration philosophical discussions that define and delimitate conspiracy theories, must take a broad interpretative frame while acknowledging the existance and analyzing these theories. This broader frame would include witchcraft, gossip, rumors, urban legends etc., and the author implements this methodology to the conspiracy theories arround AIDS in South Africa, showing a „fine line between paranoid fantasies and actual plots“ and increasing tendency in the social sciences „to assimilate social critique and conspiratorial thinking, using the latter to delegitimize the former“ (Fassin 2021, 128).

Ronald H. Fritze takes the following point: „When people start believing things and ideas that are not true, it can become a problem for any society. Nazi Germany is a good example of a nation where too many citizens came to believe pseudoscientific claims about the racial superiority of Germans and the degeneracy and malevolence of Jews, Slavs and Gypsies. [...] When faced with so many myths, pseudo-historical narratives, pseudoscientific theories and conspiracy theories, there is a need to re-assert common sense and intellectual integrity“ (Fritze 2022, 16). This statement and example is important for understanding the potential danger of beleiving in conspiracy theories *en masse*.

Quoting Jovana Diković, analyzing conspiracy theories, „their power and influence on the public is a characteristic not only of those societies which are going through major socio-political crises and transformations but also of stable economic-political systems. Also, in terms of the range of topics and goals they are inspired by, conspiracy theories are equally compatible with populists reactions that come both from the positions of the left and from the positions of the right, as well as from conservative socio-political programs. It is their universal adaptability and drinkable simplicity that makes the most interesting aspect of their popularity“ (Diković 2011, 346). Diković emphasizes the populist character of conspiracy theories, concluding that one of their most important features is inclusive character. Through these theories the public gets acquainted with contents which are believed to be indisclosable to ordinary people. In that way, they, even shortly, step away from the cathegory of average cognition and presented truth. Arguing this, Diković sees potential in conspiracy theories, through possibilities of various instrumentalizations and epistemiological and cognitive dimensions of these theories (Diković 2011, 346). Substantial relationship between populism and conspiracy theories was explained by Fenster (2008). He argues that dismissing conspiracy theories as pathological or marginal flattens contemporary politics and culture because they are—contrary to popular portrayal—an intense articulation of populism and, at their essence, are strident calls for a better, more transparent government. Also some recent theoretical and empirical studies about this relationship have been published in the edited volume *Populism and Conspiracy Theory* (2025), edited by Michael Butter, Katerina Hatzikidi, Constanze Jeitler, Giacomo Loperfido, and Lili Turza. Populism and conspiracy theory, are, according to the editors of this volume, clearly connected, but the relationship between the two has so far been hardly systematically explored. Contributions in this collection of papers provide in-depth analyses of specific configurations of populism and conspiracy theory and considerations of more theoretical issues. Ideologically, the case studies pay as much attention to left-wing manifestations of populism as to those on the right, while highlighting that populist movements often cut across the traditional left-right divide. Authors in the theoretical chapters consider in their research the aesthetics and forms of populist conspiracism or its dependence on new media, all this analyzed through disciplines from political science and sociology via anthropology and history to linguistics and cultural studies (Butter et al. 2025, 1-2).

Conspiracy theories may be viewed as a folklore genre, as a type of mental reasoning and narrative formation that emerged at the intersection of the cognitive and the emotional, but also in relation to the dominant discourse, or “official” or “verified” knowledge in a particular context. Rather, they are a metaconcept that denotes struggles over the very meaning of the category (Bratich 2008, 6). Bratich believes that conspiracy theories are a symptom of the discourse that positions them. In this sense, from a scientific perspective, it is not so important whether they are true or false (which all research on

legends/conspiracy theories in folklore and other disciplines dealing with narrative genres emphasize), but rather that the genre itself is structured in such a way that it prompts us to think about the realities in which they arise because, as Bratich points out, they are portals into the context that problematizes them (Bratich 2008, 6). In this sense, when considering the genre of conspiracy theories as part of the oral tradition or popular knowledge of a community, it does not mean questioning their truthfulness or factuality, but rather they should be viewed as ways of remembering and representing ideas and historical events which, although subordinated in value from the position of so-called official knowledge, in the everyday lives of individuals equally coexist and rub shoulders with dominant, verified stories and mostly arise in relation to them. Conspiracy theories exist as a category not only of description but also of disqualification (Birchall 2006, XII-XIII).

Author of this paper argues the connection between Christian determinism and the development of conspiracy theories. Theological determinism is the view that God determines every event that occurrs in the history of the world. St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Gottfried Leibniz all seemed to espouse the view of theological determinism at least at certain points in their illustrious careers. Theological determinism is often associated with Calvinist or Reformed theology.[4] The issue of determinism versus indeterminism was a central, dominating theme of Karl Popper's thought. Criticism of the thesis of determinism was considered by Popper as crucial to his defence not only of the reality of human freedom, moral responsibility and creativity but also as equally fundamental to his account of human rationality and to his theory of the content and growth of science as an objective, rational and most importantly demonstrably rational enterprise (Clark 1995, 149). Christian determinism has led to a deeply rooted belief in Western civilization that there is a reason for everything that happens, both in the past and in the present. So, at the core of the cultural logic of the European man is the search for an explanation. When it is not possible to approach scientific ones or the mistrust in those explanations delivered by official institution are present, other forms of explaining phenomena and processes in society are resorted to, such as conspiracy theories, which sometimes seem to be more persuassive, believable or obvious than scientific or official explanations brought on stage by institutions. Based on the above, it can be assumed that determinism is one of the causes of an irrational and non-objective way of thinking and finding solutions to complicated epistemological social issues, when one resorts, among other things, to the creation of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories most often appear in times of societal crises, which are defined as crises and problems only when society itself recognizes and acknowledges them as such, as a reflection of the interests of certain groups or circles of power.

[4] Leigh Vicens, „Theological determinism“. In: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/theological-determinism/ (accessed 17.01.2025)

The mistrust in the official information and state institutions is connected with now present “post-truth” era, when there are no authorities whose views are generally accepted as true, which is a fertile ground for the emergence of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are at the core of "post-truth" discussions. „Official knowledge, backed by science, politics, and media, is distrusted by various people resorting to alternative (conspiratorial) explanations“, and, according to qualitative content analysis of 522 comments under a Dutch newspaper article on conspiracy theories, there are four points of controversy: "habitus of distrust"; "who to involve in public debates"; "which ways of knowing to allow"; and "what is at stake?" „The diverging opinions outline the limits of pluralism in a post-truth era, revealing tensions between technocratic and democratic ideals in society“ (Harambam, Grusaukaite, Wildt 2022, 784). Also, some new research show that „more than merely mimicking modern science in order to augment epistemic authority, conspiracy theorists wish to purify it and re-install its free spirit of inquiry. Their critique is targeted at the dogmatic nature of scientific assumptions, the authority of scientific institutions, and, indeed, the epistemic and social boundary work performed by scientists to sustain this authority. Science, we may say, is at once sacralized for its intentions but demonized for its manifestations“ (Harambam, Aupers 2014, 477). In this way, one may observe two parallel phenomena at the center of Western cultural logic: the need for an explanation derived from the world view brought about by theological determinism and, on the other hand, the need to liberalize science and free it from the "dogmas" that, according to some, are imposed by scientific institutions. Conspiracy theories in a European scope, which is somewhat unique and significant, are important, because European influences spread to the United States and other parts of the world, in civilizational and historical sense, including conspiracy theory concepts.

Ending remarks

In today's "post-truth" era, when there are no authorities whose views are generally accepted as true, due to raising distrust in the state and, in general, official institutions, conspiracy theories are intertwined with political discourses and compete with them, mixing facts and fiction. Contemporaneity brought the vaccine hesitancy as one of the important issues.The context of the coronavirus pandemic contributed to the emergence of hitherto marginalized or secondary actors, bringing into focus many heterogenous conspiracy theories. The result was an epistemological disorientation in which rival systems of knowledge and belief fought for emotional and cognitive authority in the public eye. Some researchers believe that when people begin to believe falsehoods *en masse*, it brings far-reaching consequences, such as those in Nazi Germany, and they call for the social and intellectual responsibility and integrity. Others are of the opinion that there are situations, although they require special preconditions, when only *particular* conspiracy theories can be given a certain measure of truth.

Theological determinism, at the core of European civilization, which was under Karl Popper's severe criticism, might be considered as one of the causes of an irrational and non-objective way of thinking and finding solutions to complicated epistemological societal issues, when one resorts, among other things, to the creation of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories most often appear in times of societal crises, which are defined as crises and problems only when society itself recognizes and acknowledges them as such, as a reflection of the interests of certain groups or circles of power. Two parallel phenomena at the center of today Western cultural logic may be observed: the need for an explanation derived from the world view brought about by theological determinism and, on the other hand, in the spirit of the "post-truth" era, the need to liberalize science and free it from the "dogmas" that, according to some, are imposed by scientific institutions.

Researcher, being a historian, must use critical analysis, when aproaching conspiracy theories. Multitude of possible theoretical interpretations given by contemporary scientific research should enable a researcher to gain „a broader picture" and to understand the complexity of the subject and also the far-reaching consequences conspiracy theories and their influence may have on contemporary societies and individuals, on various social and political processes, as a reflection of crisis situations, political, cultural and social changes in a society. By applying theoretical viewpoints on the examples from the past and the present, through field work or historical research, one can draw a fine line that may separate facts and fiction, but being aware that modern science is still a constant current. While taking off veils of ideology, of the irrational, fear and other psychological aspects, politics, economic and marketing interests, final conclusions may never be made, due to the impossibility of a researcher to be completely objective nor impartial, but must be pursued. Social engagement of researchers is desirable, if not necessary, when explaining and dispelling the various conspiracy concepts. Otherwise, if the larger part of society members really start to believe in certain conspiratorial narratives, based on the irrational and on collective fears and anxieties deeply rooted in a particular society, and encouraged by interests of groups or institutions of politics and economy, catastrophe scenarios may come into reality, as it was best seen in the case of Nazi Germany. An anthropologist would probably opt for a multi-layered interpretation of the various concepts of conspiracy theories, which leads more to relativism.

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NEOLIBERALISM: THE MYTH OF THE FREE MARKET OR THE DOMINANT PARADIGM OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract: Neoliberalism represents one of the most influential economic and social concepts of the contemporary era, whose impact extends far beyond the sphere of economic policy. The subject of this paper is the analysis of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine, ideology, and social paradigm, with particular emphasis on its historical development, fundamental principles, and consequences for contemporary society. The aim of the paper is to critically examine the role of neoliberalism in shaping the relationship between the state, the market, and the individual, as well as its impact on social inequalities, the labor market, and the welfare state. The study applies the method of content analysis and a critical review of relevant scientific literature indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The findings indicate that neoliberalism has contributed to the processes of globalization and economic integration, but also to the growth of economic stratification, capital concentration, precarious labor, and social insecurity. It is concluded that neoliberalism is not merely an economic model but a complex social project that continues to significantly shape contemporary economic, political, and social relations.

Keywords: neoliberalism, globalization, social inequalities, welfare state, social paradigm.

Introduction

Neoliberalism represents one of the most influential, yet also one of the most controversial concepts in contemporary social sciences. Although it is most commonly associated with the ideas of free markets, deregulation, privatization, fiscal discipline, and the reduction of the state's role in the economy, its meaning is far more complex. Neoliberalism is not merely an economic doctrine but also a political project, an ideological framework, and a social paradigm that shapes the relationship between the state, the market, the individual, and society. For this reason, the question of whether neoliberalism is a myth of the free market or the dominant paradigm of contemporary society is of particular importance for sociological analysis.

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In the scientific literature, neoliberalism is often described as a concept whose use is simultaneously widespread and inconsistent. Boas and Gans-Morse (2009) demonstrate that the concept of neoliberalism has undergone a significant historical transformation, evolving from a term denoting a renewed liberal economic philosophy into a critical concept used to analyze radical market reforms. This insight is important because it suggests that neoliberalism is not a fixed category but a concept that has changed according to historical, political, and academic contexts. Consequently, it cannot be interpreted solely as an economic policy but must also be understood as a broader social phenomenon with ideological, institutional, and cultural implications.

Mudge (2008) conceptualizes neoliberalism as a specific ideological system formed through the interaction of intellectual, bureaucratic, and political fields. According to this perspective, neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policy measures but a mode of thinking that presents market logic as the natural and desirable model for organizing society. This is particularly important from a sociological perspective because it demonstrates that neoliberalism operates not only through institutions but also through norms, values, and expectations. It shapes the perception of the individual as an entrepreneurial subject who is personally responsible for his or her own success or failure.

One of the most significant contributions to understanding the spatial and institutional dynamics of neoliberalism was provided by Peck and Tickell (2002), who introduced the concept of "neoliberalization" to emphasize that neoliberalism is not a static model but an ongoing process of restructuring the state, the market, and social relations. Their approach demonstrates that neoliberalism does not simply imply the withdrawal of the state but rather its active reconfiguration according to market principles. The state is therefore not eliminated; instead, it assumes a new role by creating conditions for the expansion of market competition, the privatization of public resources, and the transfer of responsibility from collective institutions to individuals.

In this context, Harvey (2007) interprets neoliberalism as a process of "creative destruction" that simultaneously dismantles existing forms of social protection, public goods, and collective rights while creating new institutional conditions for capital accumulation. His approach is particularly significant because it connects neoliberalism with broader processes of class power, inequality, and transformations in social structure. Consequently, critiques of neoliberalism extend beyond issues of economic efficiency to encompass questions of social justice, democracy, labor, social security, and access to public resources.

Centeno and Cohen (2012), in their sociological synthesis of neoliberal development, argue that this paradigm cannot be understood merely as an ideology of elites but rather as a historical process that, over several decades, has shaped public policies, institutions, global economic flows, and social inequalities. Their analysis demonstrates that neoliberalism has taken different

forms across countries and historical periods and has produced diverse outcomes, yet its common denominator has been the strengthening of market logic as the fundamental principle of governing society.

The subject of this paper is the analysis of neoliberalism as an economic, political, and social paradigm of the contemporary era. The paper addresses the question of whether neoliberalism can be understood as a coherent doctrine of the free market or whether it constitutes an ideological and institutional project that, under the banner of market freedom, generates new forms of social control, inequality, and individual responsibility for systemic problems.

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine the theoretical foundations, historical development, and social consequences of neoliberalism. More specifically, the paper seeks to: first, explain the conceptual complexity of neoliberalism; second, analyze its transformation from an economic doctrine into a dominant social paradigm; third, examine the role of the state within the neoliberal order; fourth, identify the consequences of neoliberalism for social inequalities, labor, public services, and democracy; and fifth, explore possible alternatives in the context of contemporary crises of capitalism.

The most significant previous studies indicate that neoliberalism must be analyzed from a multidimensional perspective. Boas and Gans-Morse (2009) contribute to understanding the conceptual history and ideological transformation of neoliberalism. Mudge (2008) demonstrates that neoliberalism is an ideological system linking intellectual, political, and bureaucratic structures. Peck and Tickell (2002) emphasize the processual nature of neoliberalization and the active role of the state in extending market logic. Harvey (2007) highlights its connection to capital accumulation, class power, and the dismantling of public goods. Centeno and Cohen (2012) provide a broad sociological synthesis of the historical development and global consequences of neoliberalism.

Building upon these insights, this paper argues that neoliberalism is neither merely a myth of the free market nor simply a technical model of economic governance. Rather, it represents a dominant form of social rationality that extends market principles into almost every sphere of life, including labor, education, healthcare, public administration, culture, and even personal identity. This constitutes its particular sociological significance. Neoliberalism transforms not only economic policies but also the ways in which society understands freedom, responsibility, success, failure, and the role of the individual in the contemporary world.

Theoretical Foundations and Historical Development of Neoliberalism

Understanding neoliberalism requires an analysis of its intellectual and historical roots, which are embedded in the classical liberal tradition. Although contemporary neoliberalism is often presented as a continuation of liberal

economic thought, significant differences exist between these two concepts as a result of changes in economic, political, and social circumstances. While classical liberalism emerged in the context of opposition to feudal constraints and mercantilist state control, neoliberalism developed as a response to the crisis of the welfare state, economic stagnation, and the expansion of interventionist policies during the twentieth century.

Classical liberalism finds its foundations in the works of Adam Smith, whose *The Wealth of Nations* established the principles of a market economy based on competition, the division of labor, and economic freedom. Although Smith is frequently portrayed as an advocate of a completely free market, contemporary analyses suggest that his understanding of the role of the state was more nuanced than later neoliberal interpretations imply. Rasmussen (2016) argues that Smith viewed market freedom within a broader moral and institutional framework in which the state plays an important role in ensuring the rule of law, the provision of public goods, and social stability. This perspective demonstrates that classical liberalism did not advocate the complete withdrawal of the state from economic life.

During the twentieth century, a new liberal current emerged that would later become known as neoliberalism. Friedrich Hayek played a central role in this process by criticizing central planning and expanding state intervention while seeking to restore confidence in market mechanisms. Burgin (2012) demonstrates that Hayek, together with intellectuals associated with the Mont Pelerin Society, laid the foundations of a new economic and political paradigm that would become dominant in many Western countries over the following decades. Unlike classical liberals, neoliberal thinkers did not limit themselves to defending markets; rather, they sought to extend market logic to virtually all spheres of social life.

A particularly important role in the development of neoliberal thought was played by Milton Friedman and the so-called Chicago School of Economics. Friedman argued that free markets are more efficient than state regulation in allocating resources and promoting economic growth. Van Horn and Mirowski (2009) emphasize that the Chicago School played a decisive role in transforming economic theory and public policy by promoting the ideas of monetarism, privatization, deregulation, and individual responsibility. Its influence became especially visible during the 1980s, when the policies of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom served as practical manifestations of neoliberal economic principles.

The development of neoliberalism was not solely an intellectual process. Mirowski and Plehwe (2009) demonstrate that the spread of neoliberal doctrine was facilitated by a broad network of institutions, research centers, foundations, and political organizations that actively promoted market-oriented reforms worldwide. Through these efforts, neoliberalism gradually evolved from an

academic theory into a dominant model of economic governance that shaped the policies of international financial institutions, national governments, and global markets.

One of the central principles of neoliberal economic doctrine is deregulation, understood as the reduction of state restrictions on market activity. Proponents of this approach assume that greater economic freedom will lead to a more efficient allocation of resources, increased investment, and stronger economic dynamism. However, numerous scholars have pointed out that deregulation may also produce negative consequences, particularly in contexts characterized by weak institutional oversight and a high concentration of economic power. Crouch (2011) argues that contemporary capitalism often operates not as a system of perfect competition but rather as an environment in which large corporate actors exert significant influence over market processes and public policies.

Another important component of the neoliberal paradigm is privatization. Based on the assumption that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector, neoliberal reforms around the world have encouraged the sale of state-owned enterprises, the liberalization of public services, and the introduction of market principles into areas traditionally managed by the state. However, the experiences of different countries indicate that the outcomes of privatization have not always been uniform and have depended on institutional frameworks, levels of economic development, and the state's capacity to regulate newly emerging market relations.

The concept of the free market represents the central ideological foundation of neoliberalism. According to this perspective, economic actors should operate under conditions of minimal state intervention, while market mechanisms such as competition and price signals should guide economic activity. Contemporary sociological literature, however, increasingly emphasizes that markets are not natural or self-regulating systems but institutionally constructed arenas shaped by legal frameworks, political decisions, and social relations. For this reason, the analysis of neoliberalism requires moving beyond the simplified dichotomy between state and market and understanding the ways in which these two mechanisms mutually constitute and influence one another.

Viewed as a whole, the transition from classical liberalism to neoliberal economic doctrine represents one of the most significant processes in modern economic and political history. Although neoliberalism draws upon the liberal tradition, its institutional application and social consequences point to the emergence of a new model of governance in which market principles become the dominant criterion for organizing economic and social relations. Understanding this transformation is a necessary prerequisite for a critical analysis of contemporary society and the role that neoliberalism plays in shaping the global economic order.

In contemporary sociological, political, and economic literature, neoliberalism is increasingly interpreted not merely as an economic model but as a broad ideological and social paradigm that shapes institutions, public policies, market relations, social values, and individual behavior. In this sense, neoliberalism cannot be reduced solely to a set of measures such as privatization, deregulation, market liberalization, and fiscal discipline. Rather, it represents a particular way of thinking about society, the state, the economy, and the individual, in which market logic becomes the dominant criterion for evaluating almost every sphere of social life.

An important contribution to understanding neoliberalism as an ideology lies in recognizing its ambiguity and adaptability. Venugopal (2015) emphasizes that neoliberalism is both an analytically useful and a conceptually contested term because it is employed to describe a variety of processes, including economic reforms, state transformation, new forms of governance, and changes in individual subjectivity. This conceptual complexity does not diminish its significance; rather, it highlights the need to analyze neoliberalism as a historically contingent social project rather than as a simple and universal model of economic policy.

As a social paradigm, neoliberalism is grounded in the belief that market mechanisms represent the most efficient means of organizing not only the economy but also broader social relations. Springer (2012) demonstrates that neoliberalism functions as a discourse that simultaneously produces economic policies, shapes institutional practices, and constructs particular types of subjects. This implies that neoliberalism operates not only through state reforms and economic measures but also through language, norms, values, and the ways in which individuals understand their own responsibility, freedom, and success.

The role of the state within the neoliberal order is particularly significant. Contrary to the common assumption that neoliberalism entails the weakening or disappearance of the state, contemporary research suggests that the state remains a central actor in the construction and maintenance of market order. Laruffa (2022) argues that neoliberalism should not be understood simply as state withdrawal but rather as a process of the economization of social policy, whereby public policies are increasingly evaluated according to criteria such as efficiency, investment, and productivity. The state, therefore, does not disappear; instead, it is transformed into an institution that actively creates the conditions necessary for the expansion of market logic.

Within such a social framework, the position of the individual is also transformed. The neoliberal paradigm promotes an image of the individual as an autonomous, responsible, and competitive actor who is expected to continuously invest in personal skills, education, productivity, and employability. Christiaens (2019) analyzes this process through the concept of the “entrepreneur of the self,” arguing that neoliberal subjectivity involves not only economic behavior

but also a profound transformation in how individuals understand themselves, their opportunities, and their failures. As a result, social risks become increasingly individualized, while structural problems are more frequently interpreted as consequences of insufficient personal adaptability or competitiveness.

Competition represents one of the central principles of neoliberal society. It no longer applies solely to economic actors but extends to schools, universities, hospitals, public services, local communities, and individuals themselves. Lorenz (2012) demonstrates that the neoliberal transformation of universities has led to the expansion of managerial criteria, rankings, performance measurement, and market rationality within higher education. This example clearly illustrates how neoliberalism, as a paradigm, reshapes institutions that were traditionally based on public interest, academic autonomy, and collective missions.

Neoliberalism therefore functions not only as an economic policy but also as a mechanism for producing new social norms. Instead of emphasizing solidarity, public goods, and collective responsibility, it prioritizes individual competitiveness, market efficiency, and personal accountability. This does not mean that neoliberal societies completely abolish social institutions; rather, they reshape them to operate according to market principles. It is precisely in this process that neoliberalism derives its ideological strength: its values are often presented as natural, rational, and inevitable.

From a sociological perspective, neoliberalism constitutes a dominant social paradigm because it shapes not only economic reforms but also modes of thinking, institutional practices, and everyday life strategies. Its power lies not merely in the market itself but in its ability to transform market principles into a general model of social evaluation. Consequently, neoliberalism cannot be understood solely as a myth of the free market; it must also be viewed as an ideological and institutional project that profoundly influences the state, society, and the individual in the contemporary era.

Social Consequences and Critique of the Neoliberal Order

One of the most significant themes in contemporary debates on neoliberalism concerns its consequences for social structure and the distribution of economic resources. Although advocates of neoliberal policies argued that market liberalization, deregulation, and privatization would stimulate economic growth and general social prosperity, numerous studies indicate that these processes have often been accompanied by rising social inequalities, capital concentration, and transformations in the structure of labor. For this reason, neoliberalism represents one of the central issues in contemporary sociology, particularly in analyses of social stratification, social exclusion, and the transformation of the welfare state.

One of the most visible consequences of neoliberal reforms has been the increase in economic inequality. Piketty and Saez (2014) demonstrate that, over recent decades, many developed countries have experienced a significant concentration of income and wealth in favor of the highest social strata. The authors argue that financial market liberalization, reductions in progressive taxation, and the growing influence of capital have contributed to widening the gap between the wealthiest segments of society and the rest of the population. These findings challenge one of the fundamental assumptions of neoliberal economic theory, namely that the benefits of economic growth will gradually be distributed throughout society.

In addition to rising inequality, contemporary capitalism is characterized by an increasingly pronounced concentration of economic power. Stiglitz (2015) argues that the concentration of capital is not merely an economic issue but also a political one, as it enables the most powerful economic actors to influence the formulation of public policies and institutional rules. In this way, economic inequality can evolve into inequality of political influence, further deepening social divisions and reducing opportunities for democratic oversight of economic processes.

Significant changes have also occurred within the labor market. Neoliberal reforms have frequently been accompanied by labor market flexibilization, the weakening of collective bargaining, and a decline in job security. Kalleberg (2011) notes that the expansion of flexible forms of employment has contributed to the growth of insecure work arrangements and increased economic uncertainty for a large number of workers. Traditional forms of stable and long-term employment have increasingly been replaced by temporary contracts, freelance work, and various forms of non-standard employment.

In this context, particular attention has been directed toward the phenomenon of precarious work. Standing (2014) describes the emergence of the "precariat" as a new social group characterized by unstable employment relations, limited social rights, and a high degree of economic insecurity. Precarious work is not merely an economic issue but also an important social phenomenon that influences individual life strategies, family relations, political participation, and the sense of belonging to a community. Job insecurity is increasingly becoming a permanent feature of contemporary capitalism rather than a temporary consequence of economic crises.

The consequences of these processes are also evident in the growth of social exclusion. Savage et al. (2013) argue that contemporary stratification cannot be explained solely through income or occupation but requires an analysis of different forms of economic, cultural, and social capital. Under conditions of neoliberal transformation, access to education, healthcare, cultural resources, and social networks increasingly determines individuals' positions within the

social hierarchy. As a result, inequalities acquire a multidimensional character and are reproduced through a variety of institutional mechanisms.

A particularly important issue concerns the crisis of the welfare state. During the second half of the twentieth century, the welfare state represented one of the key mechanisms for mitigating social inequalities through systems of social protection, public education, and healthcare. However, Taylor-Gooby (2012) argues that neoliberal reforms have gradually transformed this model, with social rights increasingly being replaced by principles of individual responsibility and market efficiency. The consequence of these changes has been the weakening of traditional mechanisms of social security and the increased exposure of individuals to economic risks.

At the same time, neoliberal policies have contributed to the spread of the belief that success and failure are primarily the result of individual abilities and choices. Such an approach often overlooks the structural factors that shape life chances, including class background, access to education, regional disparities, and institutional conditions. Consequently, social problems are increasingly interpreted through an individualized lens, while issues of power, resources, and social structure are pushed into the background.

The growth of economic stratification, the concentration of capital, the expansion of precarious labor, the deepening of social exclusion, and the transformation of the welfare state represent some of the most significant consequences of this process. Although neoliberal reforms have, in certain cases, contributed to economic dynamism and productivity growth, numerous studies indicate that they have simultaneously generated new forms of social inequality and insecurity. For this reason, the relationship between the market, the state, and social justice remains one of the central themes of contemporary sociological analysis.

In public discourse, neoliberalism is often portrayed as a project of free markets, economic rationality, individual responsibility, and limited state intervention. However, a critical analysis of contemporary society reveals that this image is incomplete. In practice, neoliberalism has not entailed a simple withdrawal of the state but rather its active restructuring in accordance with the interests of markets, capital, and financial institutions. For this reason, neoliberalism should be understood simultaneously as an ideological myth of the free market and as a tangible social paradigm that has profoundly shaped institutions, public policies, economic relations, and everyday life in contemporary societies.

One of the most significant processes through which neoliberalism has become globally entrenched is financialization. This term refers to the growing influence of financial markets, financial institutions, and financial logic over the economy, the state, and society as a whole. Muellerleile and French (2022) argue that neoliberalism and financialization should not be viewed as identical processes; nevertheless, within contemporary capitalism they frequently

intersect and reinforce one another. Financial logic increasingly shapes not only economic activity but also public policies, urban development, social relations, and individual life strategies.

The recurrent crises of capitalism further expose the limitations of the neoliberal myth of the self-regulating market. The global financial crisis of 2008, the expansion of debt-based economies, crises in public services, and the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that markets alone are incapable of ensuring stability, social security, and sustainable development. Davidson (2017) argues that neoliberalism has often continued to operate after crises through regimes of permanent exception, in which emergency measures, fiscal discipline, and austerity policies are employed as mechanisms for preserving existing power relations. In other words, crises do not necessarily signal the end of neoliberalism; rather, they may become instruments of its continued adaptation and reproduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic is particularly important for understanding the resilience of the neoliberal paradigm. Although it was widely claimed that the pandemic marked the return of the state and the end of neoliberalism, Šumonja (2021) argues that such interpretations are premature. In his view, neoliberalism has never implied a weak state but rather a combination of free markets and a strong state that intervenes whenever necessary to preserve market order. Consequently, state intervention during periods of crisis should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of the demise of neoliberalism; instead, it may demonstrate its remarkable capacity for adaptation.

Similarly, Saad-Filho (2021) contends that the pandemic revealed a transition from crises within neoliberalism to broader crises of neoliberalism itself. Public health emergencies, rising social inequalities, labor insecurity, and the weakening of public institutions are not merely accidental outcomes but are closely linked to long-term processes of privatization, reductions in public capacities, and the subordination of social policy to market rationality. In this sense, the pandemic represents not only a health crisis but also a social test of the limits of the neoliberal model.

Another important dimension of the critique of neoliberalism concerns the issue of democratic deficit. Neoliberal reforms have often been presented as technical and economically necessary measures, thereby removing key questions of public interest from the sphere of democratic debate. Bruff (2014) describes this process as the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, characterized by the transformation of the state into a less democratic space that is increasingly resistant to social pressures, labor demands, and political alternatives. Consequently, neoliberalism generates not only economic consequences but also profound political effects.

Within this context, the question of post-neoliberal alternatives emerges. Such alternatives cannot simply involve a return to earlier forms of the welfare state;

rather, they require a fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between the state, the market, democracy, social security, and environmental sustainability. Critical scholarship suggests that a future beyond neoliberalism must include the revitalization of public institutions, democratic oversight of the financial sector, the strengthening of social rights, and the development of alternative models of economic organization that are not exclusively based on competition and profit maximization.

Taken as a whole, neoliberalism may be regarded as a myth insofar as it portrays the free market as a natural, neutral, and self-regulating order (Popović, 2025). At the same time, it constitutes a social reality because, over the past decades, it has profoundly shaped the global economy, state policies, financial institutions, democratic processes, and the everyday life strategies of individuals (Mlađenović, 2025). It is precisely within this dual character that its social power resides: neoliberalism functions both as an ideology and as an institutional practice of contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion

The analysis of neoliberalism through its theoretical foundations, historical development, and contemporary social consequences demonstrates that it is a phenomenon that extends far beyond the boundaries of an economic doctrine. Although it emerged as an attempt to revive liberal ideas of free markets, a limited role of the state, and individual economic freedom, neoliberalism has, over recent decades, evolved into a dominant social paradigm that shapes institutions, public policies, and everyday social relations.

The studies examined in this paper indicate that processes of deregulation, privatization, and market liberalization have contributed to significant transformations in contemporary societies. On the one hand, neoliberal reforms have stimulated economic dynamism, technological innovation, and the global integration of markets. On the other hand, numerous studies demonstrate that these developments have simultaneously been accompanied by rising economic inequalities, the concentration of capital, the expansion of precarious forms of employment, the weakening of the welfare state, and growing social insecurity. Particularly significant is the fact that economic risks have become increasingly individualized, while the structural causes of social problems have often been pushed into the background.

A critical examination of contemporary processes of globalization, financialization, and the recurrent crises of capitalism further reveals that neoliberalism is not a simple system of free markets but rather a complex institutional and ideological project that actively shapes the relationship between the state, the market, and citizens. At the same time, increasingly intense debates concerning democratic deficits, social justice, sustainable development, and the role of public institutions highlight the limitations of the existing model and the need to seek new developmental alternatives.

Based on the analysis presented, it can be concluded that neoliberalism represents both a myth and a reality of contemporary society. It is a myth insofar as it is portrayed as a natural and neutral order based solely on market freedom. At the same time, it is a reality because it has become one of the most powerful mechanisms shaping economic, political, and social relations on a global scale. The future of the neoliberal paradigm will depend on the ability of contemporary societies to establish a balance between economic efficiency, social justice, democratic accountability, and sustainable development—an endeavor that remains one of the central challenges of the twenty-first century.

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PREVENTION AND PUNISHMENT AS ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract: This paper highlights the importance of issues related to the normative presentation of the penal provisions contained in the current Law on the Foundations of the Education System. Through a theoretical framework and a methodological approach based on narrative presentation and analytical examination, the paper compares, evaluates the justification of, and provides an overview of all penal provisions prescribed by the aforementioned law, as well as a comparison with misdemeanors of the same or similar nature. The study employs analytical methods focused on normative legal acts. The significance and relevance of this research lie in the fact that particular attention is devoted to the penal norms embedded in the Law on the Foundations of the Education System, which remain insufficiently known, inadequately explained, and rarely applied in practice. The practical implications of the study point to the need for analyzing the applicability of these penal provisions, as well as the extent of their practical implementation as a result of the interaction among all stakeholders involved, ranging from the broader social community to educational institutions at all levels. Furthermore, the paper provides a foundation for future research directions and offers proposals for innovation and potential improvement, rather than merely engaging in criticism that is often driven by implicit objectives.

Keywords: education, society, system, governance, correction.

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Introduction

The role and importance of knowledge and education in the contemporary world, founded on new technologies and innovations, are of paramount significance. Innovation serves as the primary driver of progress, encompassing technological, organizational, infrastructural, environmental, and social innovations. Given this comprehensive scope, modern society would be inconceivable without educated and professionally competent human resources capable of performing key social functions. Knowledge represents a unique quality that must be continuously cultivated; therefore, every society bears a significant responsibility to encourage and motivate its individuals and groups to pursue education, personal development, and lifelong learning. The role of society in the educational process is reflected primarily in the management of all processes necessary for the uninterrupted functioning of educational activities, as well as in the allocation of adequate resources to improve, modernize, and integrate educational institutions with the labor market while enhancing communication among stakeholders for synergistic purposes (Mlađenović, 2025; Vuković et al., 2025). According to one influential perspective, the role of the state in higher education is to ensure the existence of universities without interfering in the processes of knowledge transmission and scientific research (Prnjat, 2023).

Improving the quality of education contributes to the recognition of individual and collective abilities, opportunities, interests, and needs, as well as to the effective functioning of specialized institutions established within the normative frameworks of a given society (Vuković et al., 2023; Stanković et al., 2024). The primary purpose of education is to guide individuals and fully prepare them for the performance of specific professional and social activities. In the Serbian epic poem *Banović Strahinja*, the protagonist's superior education and multilingual abilities place him in a higher moral position than his contemporaries, elevating him above both his society and his historical context (Prnjat, 2024, pp. 123–124).

In contemporary society, knowledge possesses not only cultural and social value but also a distinct economic dimension, reflected in the valuation of acquired competencies and skills within the labor market. Knowledge, abilities, and skills are exchanged in the labor market similarly to other economic goods, while employers compensate qualified workers through wages and other forms of remuneration. Income derived from employment provides the basis for economic security, social integration, wealth creation, the development of individual needs, and participation in various social activities (Vilić, 2014, p. 391).

The once-prevalent debate regarding whether investment in education should be regarded as a cost or an investment has largely been resolved. Today, investment in education is widely recognized as one of the most valuable forms

of investment. Individuals who invest in their education secure better future opportunities, improved living and working conditions, and simultaneously contribute to the advancement and progress of society. Research consistently demonstrates that the most prosperous organizations and economies are characterized by advanced technological infrastructure, highly educated and professionally trained human resources, strong commitments to market research, and substantial investments in improving working conditions and employee development. To achieve these goals, organizations continuously modernize their work processes through the adoption of new communication technologies and educational content, thereby creating new employment opportunities and restructuring existing job classifications (Giddens, 2005, pp. 512–513).

Despite the undeniable importance of education, not all countries can boast high levels of educational attainment or strong interest in learning. It is alarming that more than 130 million girls worldwide remain excluded from formal education. According to research conducted by the organization Global Citizen in 2019, ten major challenges currently affect global education systems. The most significant of these is the lack of financial resources. Developing countries often lack the financial capacity to adequately support education and therefore allocate only minimal funding to this sector. Such an approach has far-reaching consequences for knowledge acquisition, professional competence, and workforce development, affecting both current and future generations across all sectors of the economy and society.

Additional challenges include shortages of qualified teaching staff, insufficient educational infrastructure, inadequate learning resources, limited access to education for children with special needs, and discrimination against girls. These difficulties are compounded by more extreme circumstances, such as restrictions on access to education, long distances between schools and students' residences, and prohibitively high tuition costs. Acting individually or collectively, these factors significantly discourage participation in education at all levels. Educational challenges are further exacerbated by wars, social unrest, and forced migration, all of which disrupt regular educational processes and often result in long-term exclusion from learning opportunities (Global Citizen, available at: https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/).

At the same time, continuous learning, educational research, and the ongoing development of teaching practices are indispensable components of the modern educational system. The term "school" in this context refers generically to all levels of education rather than any specific institution. The education of future leaders in educational processes must cultivate an awareness of the importance of learning and innovation, while professional development programs should be adapted to the individual characteristics and comparative advantages of each educator. These unique strengths provide opportunities for fostering creativity and innovation. Effective collaboration must extend beyond occasional professional training sessions and be realized within educational institutions

themselves, which remain the primary sites for acquiring and applying new knowledge. High-quality communication and interaction among all participants in the educational process facilitate greater progress in fostering creativity and educational development.

The concept of the learning community has gained considerable attention in contemporary educational theory and practice. Emerging in the United States during the 1990s, the learning community represents a social structure that connects learning with enhanced interaction among learners and educators, who jointly participate in the process of knowledge creation and acquisition. Unlike occasional professional development activities, a learning community may be defined as a group of voluntarily associated individuals who communicate shared values, develop a common vision, collaborate to improve professional practice and personal learning, and critically reflect upon their activities and the conditions under which they operate over an extended period (Bognar, 2007, p. 112). The value of this approach should be recognized as a significant opportunity for developing all essential elements of a modern educational system.

When discussing education in the Republic of Serbia, it is evident that the country faces a paradoxical situation characterized by an increasing number of functionally illiterate students on one hand and a growing number of academically outstanding students on the other. Unfortunately, education does not enjoy the social status it deserves, largely due to insufficient financial investment in this sector. Educational professionals are often inadequately compensated, which reduces motivation and affects the quality of their work. Likewise, many students lack motivation to acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies because they fail to recognize the significance of education or perceive tangible benefits from it. This situation is further exacerbated by the inadequate public promotion of education and knowledge through mass media, which frequently prioritize less educationally valuable content while reducing or completely eliminating educational programming.

The Role and Importance of Punishment – A Necessity at Any Cost?

When discussing punishment, it should be understood as a necessity arising from socially unacceptable conduct. Punishment essentially represents society's response to such behavior, and its function is twofold. On the one hand, it serves to ensure compliance with legal norms; on the other hand, it constitutes a response to conduct that violates those norms.

Through its provisions, the law prescribes rules of conduct that are binding on all citizens. However, every legal norm consists not only of a disposition but also of a sanction, which is activated whenever the disposition is violated. Punishment, or sanction, therefore constitutes an integral part of every legal norm. The disposition establishes the required rule of conduct, while the sanction guarantees compliance by prescribing consequences for its violation.

Whenever the disposition is breached, the sanction is applied to the individual who has acted contrary to the prescribed rule.

Punishment may be defined as a measure imposed on the perpetrator of an unlawful act with the aim of suppressing such behavior, based on a final and legally binding judicial decision. Through the application of punishment, the offender is deprived of certain rights or benefits, or is subjected to a form of hardship as a consequence of unlawful conduct (Ignjatović, 2010, pp. 95–98).

In legal theory, there is a long-standing division between two opposing approaches to the purpose of punishment. According to the first approach, punishment should possess a retributive character, meaning that its primary purpose is to inflict suffering upon the offender. Advocates of this perspective argue that wrongdoing must be answered with an equivalent response and that the most effective reaction to unlawful conduct is punishment proportional to the offense committed.

The second approach views punishment as having a broader and more meaningful social purpose. According to this perspective, punishment should not serve merely as retaliation but should fulfill an educational and corrective function by encouraging feelings of responsibility, remorse, and a willingness to undergo resocialization and reintegration into society. Proponents of this view argue that retribution alone deepens the divide between the offender and society, whereas punishment as a corrective and rehabilitative mechanism facilitates the adaptation of socially maladjusted individuals to a lawful and socially acceptable way of life (Antonović, 2018, p. 345).

From the perspective of a progressive society committed to continuous development, the latter approach appears more humane, balanced, and constructive. This is particularly relevant when the age of the offender is taken into consideration. Within educational systems, individuals are often still in the formative stages of personal development, and their identities continue to evolve. Excessive rigidity and punitive severity may therefore carry the risk of interrupting the personal and social development of young individuals whose personalities have not yet fully matured.

As one of the most common legal institutions, punishment occupies a central place in criminal law and forms an integral part of numerous legislative acts. Most statutes contain a separate chapter devoted to penal provisions, usually located near the end of the legal text. These provisions serve to protect the implementation of legal norms and ensure their observance. However, recognizing the importance of sanctions should not diminish the need for broader social engagement. In order to preserve the authority of legal norms without creating conditions that could lead to social instability or disorder, it is necessary for neglected social groups, public institutions, and relevant services to demonstrate a stronger presence and more effective action in addressing the underlying causes of unlawful and socially undesirable behavior.

Penal Provisions in the Law on the Foundations of the Education System

The current Law on the Foundations of the Education System contains penal provisions in Chapter XII. At the outset, it is necessary to distinguish between sanctions applied to students by educational staff within the educational process and statutory penalties prescribed for other participants in the educational system. Disciplinary measures imposed on students are generally intended to shape and improve behavior and educational outcomes. However, existing practices of student punishment have not consistently produced the desired results (Jevtić, 2018, p. 99). In the context of this paper, particular attention is devoted to legal sanctions prescribed for educational institutions, parents, and legal guardians, whose roles, responsibilities, and influence are often overlooked despite their importance within the educational system.

Article 191 of the Law prescribes fines ranging from RSD 100,000 to RSD 1,000,000 for an educational institution in a variety of circumstances, including: failure to enroll a child in a preschool institution or primary school for participation in the compulsory preparatory preschool program; failure to enroll a child in primary education; failure to adopt a development plan and annual work plan; failure to perform the national anthem of the Republic of Serbia; conducting experimental educational programs without the approval of the Ministry or implementing status changes during the experimental period; failure to adopt and implement an Individual Education Plan (IEP); failure to adopt or implement educational programs and standards in a timely manner; failure to prescribe procedures for the protection and safety of children and students; failure to undertake appropriate measures in cases involving violations of the law or serious breaches of employee duties; permitting political party activities within the institution; employing personnel who do not meet statutory requirements; failure to provide the Ministry with relevant information concerning the licensing of teachers, educators, and professional associates; failure to suspend employees in cases involving serious breaches of duty; and concluding contracts for the delivery of instruction contrary to legal provisions.

Responsibility for these violations is also borne by the institution's principal, who may be personally fined between RSD 25,000 and RSD 100,000. Educational institutions may additionally be fined from RSD 200,000 to RSD 2,000,000 if they commence operations, establish satellite departments, perform extended activities, implement status changes, or change the institution's name or headquarters contrary to legal requirements. In such cases, principals may also be fined between RSD 50,000 and RSD 150,000.

The legislator has also prescribed penalties for legal entities that use or disclose data obtained through educational activities contrary to the purpose specified in the request for data collection. Such legal entities may be fined between RSD 50,000 and RSD 1,000,000. Likewise, natural persons who use or disclose collected data for unauthorized purposes may be fined between RSD 5,000 and

RSD 100,000. Higher education institutions, student welfare institutions, and other publicly recognized educational providers may be fined between RSD 50,000 and RSD 100,000 if they fail to update data in the relevant official registers. Responsible persons within these institutions may additionally be fined between RSD 5,000 and RSD 50,000.

Parents or legal guardians who act contrary to statutory provisions governing parental responsibility may be fined between RSD 5,000 and RSD 100,000. Article 84 of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System stipulates that parents are responsible for enrolling their children in preschool and school institutions, ensuring regular attendance, ensuring attendance in preparatory educational programs, informing the school within 48 hours of any circumstance preventing attendance, justifying student absences, participating in educational and developmental processes, and respecting the rules of educational institutions.

A fine ranging from RSD 30,000 to RSD 100,000 may be imposed on a parent or guardian who physically, psychologically, sexually, or digitally abuses or neglects a child. The same penalty applies to individuals whose conduct violates the honor, reputation, or dignity of a child or student.

Furthermore, an institute responsible for preparing or participating in the preparation of secondary legislation may be fined between RSD 500,000 and RSD 1,000,000 if it fails to prepare and submit the required materials to the competent minister. In such cases, the director of the institute may also be personally fined between RSD 5,000 and RSD 100,000 for failure to fulfill these obligations.

Effects of Punishment – Have the Intended Objectives Been Achieved or Has the Opposite Occurred

As can be seen from the descriptive analysis of the penal provisions contained in the current Law on the Foundations of the Education System, the primary purpose of punishment is to ensure the proper functioning of education and the professional development of children and young people. It is also evident that the legislator intended to strengthen the implementation of the Law through penal norms and to encourage legally acceptable behavior by means of the threat of financial sanctions. Given the social and economic context, monetary sensitivity appears to have been one of the principal motivations behind the design of these provisions.

An examination of the penal provisions reveals that their primary object of protection is children and young people participating in the educational process. At the same time, these provisions seek to safeguard the lawful operation of educational institutions, protect state authority and integrity within the educational system, and preserve the supervisory role of the competent ministry. For example, several penal provisions are directly related to the obligation of

school-age children to participate in education. In this regard, parents or legal guardians whose children fail to attend school or complete compulsory primary education may be subject to financial penalties. This issue is particularly evident among certain national minority groups in Serbia, where irregular school attendance or non-participation in primary education remains a challenge. Consequently, judicial decisions and sanctions are most frequently imposed on these individuals, although such measures may produce consequences that differ significantly from the objectives originally intended by the legislator.

In this context, it is important to mention the initiative to introduce compulsory secondary education in the Republic of Serbia. Mandatory secondary education is envisaged in the Draft Education Strategy until 2030. Although approximately 95 percent of primary school graduates in Serbia continue their education at the secondary level, leaving only about 5 percent without further formal education, the Ministry of Education has maintained the position that secondary education should become compulsory and thereby attain the same obligatory status as primary education. This position is also consistent with the United Nations Agenda 2030, which has been ratified by the Republic of Serbia and which recognizes both primary and secondary education as essential components of universal educational access.

The introduction of compulsory secondary education would likely require corresponding amendments to the existing system of sanctions and parental responsibilities. Such measures would further strengthen the legal framework governing educational participation but would also raise important questions regarding the effectiveness of punitive mechanisms in achieving educational objectives. The central issue remains whether financial penalties alone are sufficient to address the underlying social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to educational exclusion. While sanctions may encourage compliance with legal obligations, sustainable educational outcomes often require broader measures, including social support, awareness campaigns, institutional cooperation, and targeted interventions aimed at vulnerable populations.

Therefore, the effectiveness of punishment within the educational system should not be assessed solely through the number of sanctions imposed or the level of legal compliance achieved. It should also be evaluated according to its ability to contribute to higher educational participation, improved educational outcomes, and the broader social inclusion of children and young people. In this sense, punishment may serve as a necessary legal instrument, but its ultimate success depends on its integration within a wider framework of educational policy, social support, and preventive action.

Highlighted Case Studies – Evidence of Imperfection

Judicial practice provides illustrative examples that raise important questions regarding the effectiveness and broader implications of penal provisions within the educational system. According to the practice of the Misdemeanor Court in

Pančevo, two parents were fined RSD 5,000 because they failed to justify the absences of their children, who were students in the third and seventh grades of primary school. If the fine was paid within fifteen days of the judgment, it could be substituted by community service. In cases of non-payment, the sanction could be converted into a custodial sentence or enforced through compulsory collection procedures.

Statistics from the Misdemeanor Court in Pančevo indicate that during 2017, eighty-eight misdemeanor charges were filed against parents due to their children's school absences. Thirteen decisions were issued, including two monetary fines and eleven warnings. Financial penalties were generally imposed on repeat offenders, namely parents whose failure to justify school absences had occurred on multiple occasions. Mitigating circumstances considered by the court included first-time violations, shorter periods of absence, difficult socioeconomic conditions, and similar factors.

Parents are legally obligated to justify a student's absence within forty-eight hours. If they fail to do so, the school must notify the competent municipal administration, which is then required to initiate misdemeanor proceedings against the parent or guardian. The prescribed penalty for such violations ranges from RSD 5,000 to RSD 100,000.

The problem of unjustified school absenteeism has long been recognized as a serious social issue. The habit of unauthorized absence from school may contribute to the development of negative attitudes toward obligations and responsibilities later in life. Although school absenteeism may initially appear to be a relatively minor issue, its long-term consequences may include the formation of deviant attitudes toward work, responsibility, and social norms. Evidence suggests that students who frequently engage in unjustified absenteeism during primary education often continue this behavior throughout secondary education.

From a phenomenological perspective, unjustified absenteeism may be either individual or collective. Individual absenteeism is primarily motivated by personal factors and involves students independently avoiding attendance. Collective absenteeism, by contrast, is usually associated with shared goals or group interests. It often occurs under the influence of informal student leaders who exert peer pressure on other students. However, individual absenteeism tends to have more lasting consequences because it may be linked to antisocial attitudes and difficulties in adapting to the school environment. Collective absenteeism, on the other hand, frequently diminishes as students mature and develop stronger personal identities and greater resistance to peer influence (Bouillet & Uzelac, 2007, p. 209).

Outside the judicial system, schools employ various pedagogical measures to address unjustified absences. These measures include warnings issued by homeroom teachers, reprimands imposed by teachers' councils, educational

supervision programs, and warnings preceding expulsion from school. Educational institutions may also establish additional regulations through their statutes to address excessive absenteeism. Furthermore, schools may require students with prolonged absences to take grade examinations if they have not been sufficiently assessed during the academic year.

Unjustified absenteeism is a global educational challenge. Research findings indicate that 46% of students miss classes for justified reasons, while 26% are absent without valid justification. Collective absenteeism resulting from peer agreements accounts for approximately 11% of cases. Interestingly, students rarely identify uninteresting lessons or teaching methods as primary reasons for absenteeism. Instead, absenteeism is more frequently associated with collective perceptions of school and education in general. Research has also revealed that many students do not clearly distinguish between justified and unjustified absences, often treating both categories as equivalent. Consequently, there is a strong argument for providing students with clearer guidance regarding attendance obligations and for introducing student codes of conduct that explicitly address absenteeism (Kostadinović, 2007, p. 101).

Research has further examined where students spend their time while absent from school without authorization. This issue introduces an important social dimension to the problem. Approximately 31% of students spend their time in various commercial establishments, where they may be exposed to harmful social influences and risky behaviors. Around 13% return home or remain near their homes. This raises an important question regarding parental awareness and involvement: if students are at home during school hours, why are parents not concerned about their absence from school and why do they not question the reasons for it (Buđevac, 2018, p. 188)? Approximately 11% of students remain near the school premises, 13% spend time with romantic partners, 7% wander aimlessly, 6% socialize with friends, and only 3% spend their time walking around the city (Klapan et al., 2018, p. 50).

Sanctioning such behavior represents an important preventive measure against antisocial conduct among school-age children, where absenteeism serves as an early manifestation of avoidance of social obligations. In later stages of development, similar patterns of behavior may evolve into more serious forms of socially and legally unacceptable conduct, including delinquency and criminal activity. Therefore, school truancy should not be viewed merely as a harmless childhood mischief or a temporary developmental phase. Instead, it requires an appropriate response that combines sanctions with educational and developmental interventions designed to foster positive values, responsibility, and respect for social norms at an early age.

Conclusion

The legislator’s starting premise is that every legal act should contain penal provisions. Such provisions protect and guarantee the implementation of legal

norms while establishing a system of sanctions for those who fail to comply with the law. Punishment has traditionally served as a corrective mechanism intended to direct behavior toward compliance with legal requirements. Without an adequate sanction, there can be neither an effective legal norm nor a reliable guarantee of its observance. Within the educational system, however, punishment should primarily function as a safeguard ensuring that educational processes are conducted effectively and without significant irregularities.

A fundamental question, relevant both to this study and to future research, concerns whether penal policy within the educational system should be equated with penal policies applied in other areas of social life. The phenomenon of the "interrupted flight," previously discussed in an educational, symbolic, and exploratory context, points to the need for further examination of the long-term consequences of punitive measures on young individuals whose personal development remains incomplete. The importance of education and the role of the educational system in society will always remain central topics of discussion. Educating future generations is essential for the effective functioning of any society. Well-educated generations constitute a valuable social resource and provide a strong foundation for social progress and development. Consequently, investment in education is widely regarded as one of the most valuable investments in the future. Given the significance of education, it is understandable that the legislator seeks to ensure the implementation of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System through penal provisions. The primary issue open to debate is not the existence of sanctions themselves, but rather the appropriate degree of repression in light of the circumstances involved.

The penal provisions examined in this paper fulfill an important function by ensuring compliance with the most significant provisions of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System. They are directed toward protecting the most sensitive aspects of educational regulation, including compulsory school attendance, the safety and well-being of students, the quality of educational processes, and the lawful functioning of educational institutions.

The judicial practice discussed in this study demonstrates that these penal provisions are not merely symbolic but are actively applied within the legal system of the Republic of Serbia. The case studies examined primarily concern the phenomenon of unjustified school absenteeism, which has been analyzed not only as a legal issue but also as a long-standing sociological phenomenon. School absenteeism is recognized as a potentially serious social problem because it may represent one of the earliest manifestations of antisocial behavior. For this reason, it is encouraging that judicial institutions respond to such cases and hold parents accountable in order to encourage corrective action regarding their children's attendance. The analysis also highlights the circumstances under which students engage in truancy, the motivations behind

such behavior, and the environments in which students spend their time while absent from school without authorization.

The overall conclusion of this study is that the penal provisions contained in the Law on the Foundations of the Education System are both justified and necessary. They provide a legal guarantee for the implementation of the Law and offer judicial authorities an appropriate basis for sanctioning conduct that contradicts statutory requirements. These provisions address behaviors that directly or indirectly endanger the educational system of the Republic of Serbia and the interests of students participating in the educational process.

At the same time, there remains considerable room for innovation and improvement in the application of sanctions within the educational system. Future efforts could focus on adapting penal measures to educational objectives, strengthening awareness of legal obligations under the Law on the Foundations of the Education System, and ensuring more consistent judicial enforcement. Although examples of judicial practice have been presented in this paper, there remains a strong impression that court cases involving violations of educational legislation are not examined as frequently as the prevalence of such violations would suggest. Media reports regularly indicate substantial breaches of legal provisions by students, parents or guardians, educational institutions, and responsible officials. Consequently, one might reasonably expect a much richer body of judicial practice than is currently visible.

An unavoidable conclusion is that a significant "dark figure" of undiscovered or unreported violations exists. Many breaches of the Law appear never to reach judicial proceedings and therefore remain unsanctioned. This phenomenon carries important social, pedagogical, professional, and scientific implications, particularly for the analysis of legal effectiveness, the formulation of policy recommendations, and the refinement and proper interpretation of educational norms. Addressing this gap represents an important challenge for both policymakers and future researchers concerned with the development of a more effective and accountable educational system.

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SOCIAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL EFFECTS OF ESPORTS AND THE GAMING INDUSTRY

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Abstract: Esports and the gaming industry have become significant social phenomena that increasingly influence young people, education, and the broader processes of digital transformation. The subject of this paper is the analysis of the social and developmental effects of esports and gaming, with particular emphasis on their impact on youth. The aim of the study is to examine, based on relevant scientific literature, both the positive aspects of developing digital competencies, cognitive abilities, socialization, and social capital, as well as the risks associated with problematic gaming, health-related challenges, and toxic communication in digital environments. The findings indicate that esports can contribute to the development of skills that are essential for the digital society, while simultaneously generating certain psychosocial, educational, and ethical risks. It is concluded that maximizing the positive effects and minimizing the negative consequences requires cooperation among families, educational institutions, governmental bodies, and the gaming industry. Future research should focus on the empirical examination of the long-term social consequences of esports and its role in shaping the digital generation.

Keywords: esports, gaming industry, youth, digital competencies, social capital.

Introduction

One of the most dynamic things in today's digital society is the gaming business and esports. What was formerly primarily thought of as a kind of personal amusement has developed into a sophisticated social, cultural, educational, and economic field. Esports is the term for organized competitive video gaming, which is usually played in virtual settings and is backed by spectators, teams, advertisers, streaming services, professional players, and larger online communities. According to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), esports is a type of sport in which human–computer interfaces facilitate player and team relationships while electronic systems mediate the essential elements of competitive activity. This definition is important because it positions esports not

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merely as gaming but as a broader media, technological, and social phenomenon.

In recent years, esports and the gaming industry have become important subjects of research across multiple scientific disciplines, including sociology, media studies, psychology, education, economics, sport sciences, and youth studies. Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee, and Steinkuehler (2020) demonstrate that esports research has developed into a highly interdisciplinary field that integrates issues of technology, culture, sport, education, identity, and social interaction. This interdisciplinarity makes esports particularly relevant for sociological analysis, as it can be examined not only as a market-driven industry or entertainment format but also as a space in which young people construct identities, develop digital competencies, shape social relationships, and participate in new forms of cultural production (Dasic, 2018; Dašić, 2025).

One of the most important problems from a sociological standpoint is how gaming and esports affect young people as a social group. In digital gaming contexts, youth are the most significant users, audiences, and content producers. In addition to gaming, their involvement in esports activities includes peer communication, teamwork, watching streams, studying methods, participating in online communities, honing digital skills, and establishing connections with more diverse cultures. In a thorough assessment of the research, Zhong, Guo, Su, and Chu (2022) discovered that playing esports may help people develop 21st-century abilities like social responsibility, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and digital literacy. These findings suggest that esports possess significant educational and developmental potential, particularly when incorporated into organized, pedagogically structured, and institutionally supported activities.

Without taking into account the wider psychological implications of digital play, it is impossible to completely comprehend the positive features of video games and gaming culture. According to Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014), playing video games can improve attention, perseverance, emotional control, cooperation, and prosocial conduct, among other cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social benefits. Even while these impacts vary depending on the kind of game, amount of time spent playing, player motivation, and social environment, current research is moving away from oversimplified interpretations that depict video games as either totally beneficial or totally negative. Rather, the prevailing perspective sees gaming and esports as conflicting phenomena that can be sources of risk as well as opportunities for growth.

A particularly important area of research concerns social capital and the social relationships developed within online gaming communities. Kim, Jeong, Lee, and Yoo (2022) demonstrated in a longitudinal study that social capital plays a significant role in shaping the relationship between gaming time and

psychosocial outcomes among adolescents. Young people with stronger social capital may experience higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction through gaming, whereas those with lower levels of social capital may be more vulnerable to negative psychosocial outcomes. This finding is sociologically significant because it indicates that the effects of gaming are not universal but are influenced by broader social contexts, including family support, peer relationships, educational environments, and the quality of online communities.

Simultaneously, scientific literature draws attention to possible hazards linked to intense engagement in online gaming and esports. In their systematic review of esports psychology, Bündai, Griffiths, Kirě, and Demetrovics (2019) stress the significance of looking at player motivation, the professionalization of esports activities, potential psychological risks, and the difference between problematic gaming behavior and healthy engagement. Intense participation in esports and online gaming may also be linked to lifestyle choices, levels of physical activity, mental health issues, and general social functioning, according to Chan et al. (2022). Simplistic conclusions should therefore be avoided. The social impact of esports depends on the extent of engagement, contextual factors, motivational structures, institutional support, family supervision, educational policies, and the manner in which society and public institutions recognize and regulate this phenomenon.

Based on these considerations, the subject of this paper is the analysis of the social and developmental effects of esports and the gaming industry on youth and society as a whole. The study seeks to demonstrate that esports are not merely a marginal form of digital entertainment but rather a complex social field in which education, technology, culture, economics, peer communication, social capital, and emerging digital-age risks intersect. Particular attention is devoted to examining how esports and the gaming industry can contribute to digital inclusion, the development of youth competencies, and the creation of new professional opportunities, while also identifying the psychosocial, health-related, ethical, and educational risks associated with uncontrolled or excessive participation in digital gaming environments.

The main objective of this paper is to critically analyze, based on relevant scientific literature, the role of esports and the gaming industry in contemporary society, with particular emphasis on youth as both the most active and the most vulnerable social group within this domain. The specific goals are to: (1) explain esports as a new kind of digital culture and social interaction; (2) investigate its potential to help young people develop digital, cognitive, communicative, and social skills; (3) emphasize the importance of online communities and social capital in shaping young gamers' experiences; (4) identify the main risks associated with excessive gaming, psychosocial pressures, sedentary lifestyles, and digital addiction; and (5) suggest a balanced societal approach that neither demonizes or idealizes gaming.

Esports and gaming need to be seen from a variety of angles, as prior study has shown. One of the most often used definitions of esports was given by Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), who also listed the main reasons people watch esports. Reitman et al. (2020) emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of esports research and systematized its progress. Zhong et al. (2022) made a substantial contribution to our understanding of esports as a setting for the development of juvenile skills. Granic et al. (2014) broadened the conversation about video games' beneficial social, emotional, and cognitive effects. The significance of social capital in comprehending the connection between gaming and psychosocial outcomes was highlighted by Kim et al. (2022). Bányai et al. (2019), together with Chan et al. (2022), advanced the critical understanding of the psychological, health-related, and lifestyle risks associated with intensive gaming and esports participation.

The synthesis of these findings demonstrates that esports and the gaming industry are multidimensional phenomena. They can simultaneously function as spaces for learning, socialization, creativity, digital inclusion, and youth development, while also serving as environments characterized by risk, inequality, pressure, commercialization, and potential psychosocial problems (Dašić et al., 2023; Dašić et al., 2024; Ilievska Kostadinović et al., 2025). For this reason, a sociological approach is required—one that examines esports in relation to institutions, families, schools, peer groups, labor markets, the digital economy, and public policy. Such an approach enables esports and the gaming industry to be understood not as isolated youth activities but as integral components of the broader transformation of contemporary society.

Esports and the Gaming Industry as Factors in the Social and Educational Development of Young People

Esports and the gaming industry are becoming more and more vital for young people to develop a variety of skills in today's digital culture, going beyond the realm of entertainment. Despite the fact that video games are frequently linked to risks in public discourse, research indicates that their effects are more nuanced and vary depending on the kind of game, how it is played, the social setting, player motivation, and the educational setting in which it is played. Digital competences, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, strategic decision-making, information processing speed, and young people's interest in STEM disciplines hold a special place in current study.

Digital competencies no longer refer only to the technical ability to use digital devices; they also include understanding digital systems, communicating in online environments, evaluating information, solving problems, and acting creatively in digital spaces. In this sense, esports and video games can be viewed as environments in which young people develop functional digital literacy through practice. Connolly, Boyle, MacArthur, Hainey, and Boyle (2012), in a systematic review of empirical research, show that computer games

and serious games may be associated with learning, skill development, motivation, and engagement. This finding is important because it indicates that gaming should not be analyzed solely through screen time, but also through the type of activity, cognitive demands, and educational outcomes that may result from such activity.

A particularly significant aspect concerns the development of twenty-first-century skills. Qian and Clark (2016), in their review of research on game-based learning, emphasize that games can foster critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity. These findings are highly relevant for the sociological understanding of youth, as they show that digital games can function as an informal learning space in which competencies required for contemporary education, work, and social participation are developed. In the context of esports, these competencies are especially evident through team coordination, role distribution, opponent analysis, strategic planning, and decision-making under time pressure.

Problem-solving is one of the most frequently emphasized cognitive benefits of strategic video games. Adachi and Willoughby (2013), in a longitudinal study, showed that playing strategic video games may be associated with the development of self-reported problem-solving skills among adolescents, as well as with indirect positive effects on academic achievement. The importance of this finding lies in the fact that certain types of games, particularly those requiring planning, resource assessment, strategic thinking, and adaptation to changing conditions, may have developmental potential for young people. Esports, as an organized form of competitive gaming, further strengthens these processes because it involves situational analysis, rapid decision-making, coordination with teammates, and constant strategic adjustment.

The cognitive effects of video games have been particularly examined in the areas of attention, visual perception, and speed of information processing. One of the most influential studies in this field showed that action video games can affect visual selective attention and the ability to process multiple pieces of information in a complex visual environment (Green & Bavelier, 2003). A later meta-analysis by Bediou et al. (2018) confirmed that the effects of action video games are most pronounced in the domains of perception, attention, and spatial cognition. However, these results do not mean that every video game has the same effect. On the contrary, scientific literature emphasizes that cognitive outcomes must be analyzed in relation to game genre, intensity of play, player age, duration of exposure, and the broader life context.

Creativity within gaming culture develops through several mechanisms. Games often require players to experiment, combine different approaches, design new strategies, and solve problems that do not have a single predetermined solution. In such an environment, young people can develop flexibility of thought, improvisational ability, and creative use of digital resources. Open-world

games, simulations, strategy games, and team-based games are particularly important because they enable players to develop various forms of creative thinking through interaction, planning, and experimentation. Barr (2017), in a randomized study, showed that playing commercial video games can contribute to the development of skills such as communication, adaptability, and resourcefulness, which is particularly important for understanding gaming as a space for developing transversal competencies.

From an educational perspective, it is important to emphasize that the potential of video games is not automatic but depends on how they are used. Wouters, van Nimwegen, van Oostendorp, and van der Spek (2013), in a meta-analysis of the cognitive and motivational effects of serious games, show that such games can be more effective than conventional methods in terms of learning and knowledge retention, but that their effect is stronger when they are connected with a clear pedagogical structure, feedback, and instructional support. This is especially important for analyzing esports and gaming within a national context, because developmental benefits do not depend only on the games themselves, but also on educational policies, institutional support, digital infrastructure, and the capacity of schools to recognize the educational potential of digital media.

Esports can also be significant for developing interest in STEM fields. Although esports is not the same as formal STEM education, it introduces young people to digital ecosystems that involve understanding technology, data, algorithms, system performance, platform economy, graphics, design, streaming, and game analytics. Young people who actively participate in gaming communities often encounter issues of technical optimization, data analysis, digital content production, programming, video editing, and online channel management. In this way, gaming can serve as an entry point into broader digital learning, especially when supported by families, schools, and local communities.

Nevertheless, scientific caution is necessary. The development of digital competencies, creativity, and cognitive abilities does not result from every form of gaming, nor can it be observed in isolation from social conditions. Excessive, uncontrolled, or one-dimensional gaming may have consequences entirely different from those of organized, moderate, and educationally oriented gaming experiences. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between spontaneous gaming, pedagogically designed game-based learning, professional esports, and recreational participation in gaming communities.

Viewed synthetically, the available scientific literature shows that esports and the gaming industry may have significant developmental potential for youth. They can foster digital literacy, strategic thinking, problem-solving, cognitive flexibility, team communication, creativity, and interest in technological fields. However, this potential should not be regarded as self-evident, but rather as a possibility that is realized only when appropriate educational, family, institutional, and social conditions exist. For this reason, the analysis of esports

in the context of a particular country should include not only individual effects on young people, but also the broader social framework within which digital competencies are developed, valued, and transformed into educational, cultural, and economic resources.

One of the most significant sociological dimensions of esports and the gaming industry concerns their influence on the socialization of young people and the formation of new forms of social relations in the digital environment. Unlike earlier generations of video games, which mainly involved individual gaming experiences, contemporary esports and online gaming are based on interaction, cooperation, communication, and participation in virtual communities. In such an environment, players do not function merely as users of digital content, but also as members of complex social networks in which identities are shaped, friendships are established, behavioral norms are developed, and new forms of social capital are created.

Socialization in the digital environment is a process through which individuals adopt values, rules, behavioral patterns, and communication practices characteristic of a particular online community. Contemporary multiplayer games and esports platforms enable young people to interact with many peers from different social, cultural, and national backgrounds. Kowert, Domahidi, and Quandt (2014) show that online games represent an important space for developing and maintaining friendships, and that players often establish meaningful social relationships that do not end in the virtual environment but extend into everyday life. This finding is particularly important for understanding esports as a space in which new forms of social connectedness among young people are developed.

One of the key elements of contemporary esports is teamwork. Most popular esports disciplines, such as League of Legends, Counter-Strike, Valorant, or Dota 2, are based on the coordination of several players who must communicate, make joint decisions, and harmonize their roles within the team. Jenny, Manning, Keiper, and Olrich (2017) emphasize that esports represents an environment in which players develop communication skills, leadership abilities, cooperation, and the capacity to function within complex team structures. For this reason, esports increasingly attracts the attention of researchers who view it as a potential environment for the development of social competencies and collective action.

The concept of social capital occupies a particularly important place in the analysis of esports. According to contemporary sociological approaches, social capital refers to resources arising from social networks, mutual trust, cooperation, and belonging to a community. In the context of digital games, social capital can be formed through interaction with other players, participation in teams, knowledge exchange, and involvement in various forms of online communities. Trepte, Reinecke, and Juechems (2012) showed that online

gaming may be associated with the development of social capital, particularly through the strengthening of social ties and the sense of belonging to a group. These findings indicate that digital games are not necessarily spaces of isolation, as is often assumed in public discourse, but may represent an important mechanism of social connection.

The development of online communities represents one of the most visible forms of social transformation brought about by the gaming industry. Contemporary players are not limited to the act of playing itself; they actively participate in forums, Discord servers, Twitch channels, Reddit communities, and other platforms that enable continuous communication. Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne (2014) point out that streaming platforms such as Twitch represent new forms of social spaces in which communities are created based on shared interests, interaction, and the exchange of experiences. In such communities, players do not merely consume content but actively participate in its creation, interpretation, and dissemination.

Another important aspect concerns the formation of digital identity. In online environments, young people have the opportunity to shape and present different aspects of their identity through avatars, usernames, communication styles, and membership in various groups. Gee (2005) emphasizes that video games enable the development of multiple identities through identification with roles, communities, and activities within virtual environments. Such a process may contribute to the development of self-confidence, the exploration of personal interests, and the formation of a sense of belonging, particularly among young people who have limited opportunities for social affirmation in traditional environments.

In addition to individual identity, collective identity also plays a significant role within esports teams and gaming communities. Seo (2016) emphasizes that esports represents a specific cultural space in which players develop a sense of community and belonging, often independently of geographical, ethnic, or social boundaries. This characteristic makes esports one of the most globalized forms of contemporary youth culture.

However, socialization in the digital environment is not without challenges. Online communities can simultaneously be spaces of support and cooperation, but also spaces of conflict, toxic communication, discrimination, and cyberbullying. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze not only the positive but also the negative aspects of digital social interactions. Nevertheless, most contemporary research indicates that the quality of social outcomes depends primarily on the manner of participation in the community, the social norms that dominate within it, and the broader institutional and family context.

In general, the gaming business and esports constitute a significant area for modern adolescent socializing. Young people build many types of social capital through collaboration, communication, involvement in online groups, and the

creation of digital identities. These developments may have a big impact on their personal, academic, and professional growth. Because of this, esports need to be considered a significant social phenomena that actively contributes to the development of new social interaction patterns in the digital era.

Challenges and Risks of Esports and the Gaming Industry in Contemporary Society

Alongside the development of esports and the expansion of the gaming industry, scientific literature has increasingly focused on the potential risks associated with intensive and uncontrolled video game use. Although numerous studies point to the positive educational, cognitive, and social effects of gaming, contemporary approaches emphasize the need for a balanced understanding of this phenomenon. Particular attention in academic debates is devoted to problematic gaming, video game addiction, young people's mental health, physical inactivity, sleep disorders, and broader psychosocial consequences that may arise from excessive use of digital games.

One of the most significant steps in the institutional recognition of this problem was the inclusion of Gaming Disorder in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) by the World Health Organization. Pontes et al. (2021) emphasize that this represented a turning point in the scientific and clinical understanding of problematic gaming, as it enabled clearer definition of criteria, diagnostic procedures, and research frameworks. However, the authors stress that it is necessary to distinguish between a high level of engagement in gaming and an actual gaming disorder, since intensive participation in esports or gaming does not automatically imply addiction.

Problematic gaming is most often defined as a behavioral pattern characterized by loss of control over time spent gaming, prioritizing gaming over other life activities, and continuing to play despite negative consequences. Kuss and Griffiths (2012) point out that individuals with more pronounced forms of problematic gaming often experience difficulties in education, family relationships, professional functioning, and social life. These findings are particularly important for the analysis of youth, since adolescents and young adults represent the group most intensely involved in digital gaming culture.

In addition to problems related to behavioral control, a significant body of research examines the relationship between video gaming and mental health. Mihara and Higuchi (2017), in a systematic review of the literature, indicate that problematic gaming may be associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and lower levels of psychological well-being. At the same time, the authors emphasize that causal relationships are not always straightforward. In some cases, psychological difficulties may be a cause of excessive gaming, while in others, excessive gaming may contribute to the worsening of existing psychological problems. For this reason, contemporary

research increasingly seeks to understand the complex interaction between individual characteristics, social environment, and digital behavior.

Particular attention is also paid to health aspects related to prolonged sitting and lack of physical activity. Esports, as a professional or semi-professional activity, involves long periods of sitting, intense concentration, and frequent exposure to screens. DiFrancisco-Donoghue, Balentine, Schmidt, and Zwibel (2019) point out that esports players often do not meet recommended levels of physical activity and that some players may experience problems related to a sedentary lifestyle, including an increased risk of metabolic disorders, postural problems, and musculoskeletal complaints. These findings do not mean that esports is harmful in itself, but rather indicate the need to integrate physical activity and health education into esports programs.

One of the most frequently studied problems concerns sleep disturbances. Intensive gaming during evening and night hours, exposure to blue light from screens, and high psychophysiological activation may negatively affect sleep quality and duration. King, Gradisar, Drummond, Lovato, and colleagues (2013) showed that excessive video gaming may be associated with delayed bedtime, shorter sleep duration, and increased daytime fatigue. Among young people, who are already in a sensitive phase of biological and psychosocial development, such disturbances may affect concentration, academic achievement, emotional stability, and general health.

Psychosocial risks are not limited solely to the individual level. Contemporary research indicates that excessive gaming may also affect the quality of family relationships, educational achievement, and the social integration of young people. Paulus, Ohmann, von Gontard, and Popow (2018) emphasize that problematic gaming is often associated with family conflicts, weaker academic motivation, and reduced participation in offline social activities. However, the authors also point out that risk is not the same for all players, but depends on gaming intensity, family environment, social support, and individual psychological characteristics.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that contemporary scientific literature increasingly rejects simplified and moralistic interpretations of video games. The problem does not lie in the existence of esports or gaming itself, but in the way they are used. Stevens, Dorstyn, Delfabbro, and King (2021) indicate that most young people who play video games never develop symptoms of addiction, and that it is necessary to avoid generalizations that portray the entire gaming population as a risk group. Scientific consensus is increasingly moving toward understanding problematic gaming as a specific behavioral pattern that emerges from the interaction of individual, social, and technological factors.

Available research suggests that esports and the gaming industry may be associated with various psychosocial and health risks, particularly in cases of excessive and uncontrolled gaming. The most commonly identified problems

include video game addiction, psychological difficulties, physical inactivity, and sleep disorders. However, scientific findings also show that these risks are neither universal nor inevitable. Their intensity depends on the individual characteristics of players, their family and social environment, and the way gaming activities are integrated into young people's everyday lives. For this reason, esports and the gaming industry should be viewed as complex social phenomena that require a balanced approach based on scientific evidence rather than stereotypes or moral panic.

The development of esports and the gaming industry has opened numerous opportunities for education, communication, socialization, and the professional development of young people. However, alongside these positive processes, complex ethical, educational, and social challenges have also emerged, increasingly attracting the attention of both scholars and practitioners. The contemporary digital generation is growing up in an environment in which the boundaries between education, entertainment, communication, and commercial content are becoming increasingly blurred. For this reason, questions concerning the balance between gaming and education, toxic communication, cyberbullying, the commercialization of young people, and the role of family, schools, and the state have become central themes in the study of the social impact of esports and the gaming industry.

One of the most significant challenges concerns establishing a balance between participation in gaming activities and educational obligations. Contemporary video games and esports platforms are designed to retain users' attention through reward systems, continuous progression, and social interaction. Although such mechanisms can contribute to motivation and engagement, they may also lead to conflict between time devoted to gaming and time intended for learning. Gentile, Lynch, Linder, and Walsh (2004) indicate that excessive gaming may be associated with reduced academic achievement and lower involvement in school activities. Although later research shows that this relationship is not simple and depends on numerous mediating factors, time management remains one of the most important challenges for the digital generation.

Another important problem concerns toxic communication in online environments. Many esports and gaming platforms enable interaction among players from different social and cultural backgrounds. Although such diversity can contribute to intercultural understanding and the expansion of social networks, it can also become a space for aggressive communication, hate speech, discrimination, and harassment. Blackburn and Kwak (2014) showed that toxic behavior is one of the most serious problems in online gaming communities and can negatively affect user experience, psychological well-being, and the sense of belonging to a community. Young players are particularly vulnerable because they are still in the process of forming their personal and social identities.

Closely related to toxic communication is the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Unlike traditional forms of peer violence, cyberbullying takes place in digital environments and is often accompanied by anonymity, a wide audience, and the possibility of continuous exposure of the victim. Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Lattanner (2014), in a meta-analysis, indicate that cyberbullying can have significant consequences for young people's mental health, including increased anxiety, depression, social isolation, and reduced self-esteem. In the context of esports and online games, this problem becomes even more serious because communication often occurs in real time and involves a large number of participants.

In addition to communication-related risks, increasing attention is being paid to the commercialization of young people in digital environments. The gaming industry is now one of the most profitable sectors of the digital economy. Contemporary games often include microtransactions, virtual goods, paid upgrades, and various forms of digital consumption. King and Delfabbro (2018) emphasize that monetization mechanisms in many games are designed to encourage continuous user spending and engagement, which may particularly affect young people who are still developing the ability to critically assess commercial messages. This aspect of gaming raises important questions concerning consumer protection, media literacy, and the ethical responsibility of the industry.

The role of the family occupies a particularly important place in the analysis of these challenges. Research shows that parental supervision, communication, and involvement in children's digital activities can significantly influence outcomes related to video game use. Nikken and Jansz (2014) indicate that different forms of parental mediation, including discussion about digital content, shared media use, and rule-setting, can contribute to the development of healthier patterns of digital behavior. The family thus becomes an important factor in shaping young people's relationship with gaming, esports, and the broader digital environment.

In addition to the family, educational institutions also play a significant role. Contemporary schools are increasingly faced with the need to develop students' digital and media literacy and to prepare them for a critical understanding of digital platforms and online communities. Jones and Mitchell (2016) emphasize that digital citizenship programs can contribute to reducing risky forms of online behavior and developing responsible communication in digital spaces. In this sense, schools should not view gaming exclusively as a problem, but also as an opportunity for developing new educational approaches and competencies.

Lastly, by establishing an institutional and regulatory framework, the state also plays a significant role. Data protection, online safety, addiction prevention, commercial practice regulation, and digital literacy development are some of the current policies targeted at safeguarding youth in digital environments. According to Livingstone, Stoilova, and Kelly (2021), families, educational

institutions, business, and state authorities must work together to implement successful policies in this area because none of these entities can handle the intricate problems of the digital age on their own.

Esports and the gaming industry simultaneously represent a space of great opportunities and significant challenges for contemporary youth. Balancing gaming and education, preventing toxic communication and cyberbullying, protecting young people from excessive commercialization, and developing responsible digital behavior have become key issues of contemporary society. For this reason, an integrated approach is necessary—one that brings together family, school, the state, and the digital industry in an effort to maximize the positive and minimize the negative effects of esports and gaming on younger generations.

Conclusion

Esports and the gaming industry represent one of the most significant phenomena of contemporary digital society, with an influence that extends far beyond the realms of entertainment and leisure. The analysis of relevant scientific literature indicates that esports can contribute to the development of digital competencies, cognitive abilities, creativity, communication skills, and social capital among young people, while simultaneously creating new forms of social interaction and digital communities.

On the other hand, research also points to the existence of certain risks reflected in problematic gaming behavior, potential negative consequences for mental and physical health, exposure to toxic communication, cyberbullying, and the increasing commercialization of digital environments. Therefore, the impact of esports and gaming cannot be viewed from a one-dimensional perspective but rather as a complex social process whose outcomes depend on patterns of use, levels of digital literacy, family support, educational environments, and institutional frameworks.

It can be concluded that esports and the gaming industry simultaneously represent both a developmental opportunity and a social challenge for contemporary youth. Maximizing their positive effects while minimizing potential risks requires coordinated efforts by families, educational institutions, public authorities, and the gaming industry itself. Only such an integrated approach can enable esports and gaming to become valuable resources for the development of digital society and human capital in the twenty-first century.

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF ART: FROM THE SYSTEM OF FINE ARTS TO MODERN AESTHETICS

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***Abstract*:** This paper explores the historical evolution and transformation of the concept of art from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the era of Modernism and contemporary aesthetic theories. The first section analyzes the gradual establishment of the "system of fine arts," tracing its roots from the early notions found in the works of Francesco da Hollanda and François Blondel, through the definitive conceptualization in Charles Batteux's 1747 treatise, to the autonomy of art formulated by Friedrich Schiller. The study highlights a modern paradox: while the Classical and Medieval concept of art—grounded in craftsmanship and rules—was clear and easily definable, the contemporary concept of art, burdened by subjectivism and pluralism, evades universal definitions. The second section shifts focus toward the methodological framework of comparative art analysis (drawing on the contributions of V. Panić and M. Ranković) and the recontextualization of the ancient concept of *mimesis*. It addresses the problem of representation within twentieth-century abstract art, contrasting and synthesizing the theoretical perspectives of Giulio Carlo Argan and Rosalind Krauss. Conclusively, the paper examines the relationship between perception, visual models of reality, and epistemology, emphasizing that contemporary art transforms *mimesis* from mere imitation and replication toward a complex system of reference and subjective expression.

***Keywords*:** concept of art, fine arts, mimesis, comparative aesthetics, abstract art, representation, autonomy of art.

Introduction

In the 16th century, while discussing the visual arts, Francesco da Hollanda accidentally used the expression "fine arts" (*boas artes* in the original Portuguese). However, as natural as it sounds to us today, the term did not take root at the time (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 17). The conception that corresponded

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to this expression (even though it did not use it) became distinctly manifest in the second half of the 17th century, namely in the great treatise on architecture published in 1675 by François Blondel (*Cours d'architecture*, 1675). In it, alongside architecture, he listed poetry, eloquence, painting, and sculpture, to which he further added music and dance—essentially all those, and only those, arts that predecessors had called spiritual, noble, and so on, and which would fit into the "system of fine arts" in the following century (Blondel, 1675, p. 122). Blondel saw their connection in the fact that, by virtue of their harmony, they are a source of pleasure for us. In this way, he expressed the thought that they operate through their beauty, and that this is what unites them. Nevertheless, Blondel did not explicitly use the term "fine arts."

All of the above demonstrates that, beginning in the 15th century, there was a vivid sense that painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, theater, and dance formed a distinct group of arts, separate from crafts and skills, with which they had shared the common designation of "arts" for centuries (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 23). However, it was not clear what united this group and what name they should consequently bear: spiritual, musical, noble, memorial, pictorial, or poetic arts. As late as 1744, Giambattista Vico proposed the term "agreeable" arts (*Scienza nuova*, 1744), and in the same year, James Harris (*Three Treatises*, 1744) suggested "elegant arts." Three years later, in 1747, Charles Batteux (*Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe*, 1747) named them "fine" arts (*beaux arts*). This term appeared in the title of his popular book—and it took root. Along with it, the concept itself became consolidated (Batteux, 1747, pp. 4-8).

This was a fundamental shift. For while the classification of noble or memorial, elegant or agreeable arts had remained the private property of Capriano or Castelvetro, Harris or Vico, the classification of the *fine arts* became universal. The term "fine arts" entered the vocabulary of 18th-century scholars and persisted into the following century. It was a term with a clear scope: Batteux listed five fine arts: painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance, as well as two closely related arts: architecture and eloquence (Batteux, 1747, p. 24). This list remained universally accepted, and not only did the concept of fine arts become established, but their list—the system of fine arts, namely, after the inclusion of architecture and eloquence—was fixed at the number seven. The concept of fine arts and their system seem simple and natural to us today, but the historian knows how late and with what great effort they were established.

From the mid-18th century onward, there was no longer any doubt that crafts were crafts, and not arts; that skills were skills, and not arts; meaning that only the fine arts were truly arts. Since this was the case, it was possible and necessary to call them simply "arts," as there were no other arts. This terminology took hold, though not immediately, but in the 19th century. At that point, the meaning of the word "art" changed; its scope narrowed, now encompassing only the fine arts, excluding crafts and skills. One could say: only the name persisted, while a new concept of art was born.

When this occurred, the term "fine arts" was adopted by an even narrower group of arts, namely the visual arts, the very ones previously called the "arts of design" (*arti del disegno*): it was in this sense that names like the "School of Fine Arts" or the "Society for the Cultivation of Fine Arts" were used in the 19th century, denoting schools and societies that dealt with painting and sculpture, rather than poetry and music.

Prior to that, in the mid-18th century, something more crucial took place: not only did the concept of fine arts take shape, but their theory also became established. This means that a consensus emerged regarding the common traits of the fine arts and their core essence. Today, this 18th-century theory appears questionable, but at the time, it gained almost universal recognition, and for a considerably long period. It was the work of the very same C. Batteux who had decided on introducing the name and concept of fine arts. Batteux was an author far more influential than he was outstanding; if he was influential, it was largely because he had predecessors, and because the need to separate and explain this specific group of arts had been growing for a long time.

Batteux's theory of fine arts rested on the perception that their common trait lay in imitating reality. It would seem that he was following an old, and even ancient, path well known since antiquity. Yet, this is merely an illusion. From antiquity (more precisely, from Plato and Aristotle), arts were divided into productive and imitative ones, and all discourses on imitation—*mimesis*, *imitatio*—for over 2000 years concerned solely the "imitative" arts: painting, sculpture, and poetry, but not architecture or music. It was Batteux who first treated all fine arts as imitative, thereby basing their general theory on imitation (Batteux, 1747, p. 51). Though this theory does not seem entirely successful today, it nevertheless enjoyed immense success. It was the first general theory of art within the modern understanding of art.

The 18th century, which isolated art in its modern sense, also found an expression for the distinctiveness of the laws governing it. Aristotle had already written that "the same rules do not apply to the art of poetry as to politics" and that what is impossible in reality can be correct in art. However, it was not until the end of the 18th century that this brief and pithy sentence was uttered: "Art is that which gives itself its own rule" (*was sich selbst die Regel gibt*). This thought belongs to F. Schiller, expressed in a letter to Körner (Schiller, 1793/1962, p. 245). Yet, this idea of the autonomy of art did not meet with the same widespread recognition as Batteux's idea.

Looking back at the evolution of the concept of art, we can say: such an evolution was natural, even inevitable. We can only wonder why it took so many centuries to bring this concept to its current form. And something peculiar occurred: the Classical-Medieval concept of art—the starting point of this evolution—was broad but clear; it allowed for a simple and regular definition. Its contemporary concept, however—the culmination point of that evolution—

narrower than the old one and seemingly more specific, is precisely what remains indefinite, eluding definition. This is confirmed by modern dictionaries and encyclopedias, as they either avoid a definition or stick to the old one. For instance, Larousse's definition: "*application de la connaissance raisonnée et des moyens spéciaux à la réalisation d'une conception*" concerns both the ancient and the modern concept of art. Alternatively, by narrowing the concept in accordance with its later evolution, they define art based on the 18th-century model. Lalande calls "arts" "*toute production de la beauté par les oeuvres d'un être conscient*" (Lalande, 1926, p. 75), while Runes defines them as creations whose "principle is based on beauty" (Runes, 1942, p. 33).

Concepts of the Definition of Art in the 20th Century

However, contemporary art in many of its movements, at least since the time of the Dadaists and Surrealists, no longer fits such a definition: beauty is not only not a distinguishing feature of art, but it is not even a necessary one. Theorists, wishing to account for contemporary art, reject such a definition. Doubts as to whether distinguishing art through beauty is correct appeared as early as around 1900. Half a century later, it became an almost universal conviction that this definition was incorrect. Thus, another chapter in the history of the concept of art opened.

Modern thought views a work of art in clear opposition to simple manual or mental labor; today, the meaning of a work of art is separated from secular, utilitarian purposes of a moral, political, or erotic nature. Likewise, subjectivism has become a hallmark of aesthetics, whereas Medieval aesthetics was characterized by direct objectivism. "For us, the artistic quality in a work of art is precisely the subjective expression, and we negatively evaluate any narrowing that the determination of a goal or the transmission of a specific meaning might impose on that subjective expression." In a work of art, one observes not (only) the subjective expression of the author's feelings, but "an object that takes the spectator by the hand to lead him from this world below to a higher world" (Białostocki, 1982, p. 114).

The fundamental question is how it is possible to compare two phenomena that do not belong to "the same categories." This is, therefore, the problem that must first be overcome. Vladislav Panić, in his *Aksiologika* (Axiology), offers a model for bridging this "obstacle," emphasizing: "The comparison of phenomena from different categories is only possible if they are transformed into concepts of the same category" (Panić, 1999, p. 55). This would mean that concepts can be subsumed under the same category if they share something substantial, if they possess some common essential characteristic, a common denominator. In this sense, Milan Ranković emphasizes: "It has been realized that art cannot be exhausted by combinations of classical aesthetic categories (the beautiful, the ugly, the tragic, the comic, the sublime), but that it integrates within itself a vast number of attributes that are objectively doubly grounded: a)

by the development of the content of human reality, and b) by the changing relationship toward it" (Ranković, 1973, p. 214). From this follows the conclusion that one of the vital components of art's development is its immanent tendency to encompass with its aesthetic structure a larger and more diverse number of facts—a wider scope of the content of human reality, his world, and life. Likewise, when it comes to works of art, one cannot entirely reliably demarcate what constitutes "facts," but one must certainly keep in mind that under aesthetic circumstances, it is not a mere coincidence, as it is in nature, that we see what we see.

Comparing modern paintings and historical paintings helps us understand how the past influences the present. Learning the elements of art, design, and artistic methods helps us communicate and write in a new language to compare the art of various periods. Looking at artistic creations is the foundation of learning how to write papers on the comparative analysis of works of art. The longer we look, the more information we begin to see, such as brushstrokes. Asking questions about brushstrokes can help define the type of art we are looking at. For example, Impressionism uses broad brushstrokes with visible patches of color. On the other hand, Renaissance artists used oil paint with almost hidden brushstrokes, giving the painting a lifelike appearance. These observations will help us decide which period a work might belong to when we do not know the answer.

Taken on its own, comparison cannot be a complete and successful method of cognition. Despite this, it has helped us discern the most characteristic parts of the whole and, through its mediation, arrive at a large number of facts that we certainly could not identify and collect by other means (or at least not in such a qualitative manner). The creator, through their creative act, infuses meaning into sensory facts, thereby granting these facts a certain power. Through this act and path, the creator objectifies their internal faculties. A visual artwork, as a sensory object intended for sensibility, encompasses complex natural, physiological, and biological determinations, and as such, "it emerges from natural vitality"—as Lefebvre puts it—and "appeals to the natural vitality of the human being contemplating it." This type of "natural vitality" is inherent to artists, certainly more pronouncedly than in other people, but also—and this is of primary importance—to developing children. Put simply, one could say that in this sense, developing children are closer to artists than to the ordinary, average person (Vuković, 2016, pp. 217–230).

Let us also recall the concept of *mimesis*.

The concept of *mimesis* is an ancient concept by which the imitation of reality is designated as the fundamental property of art. From the very beginnings of philosophical thought on art, its specific relationship with reality was outlined and emphasized. Regardless of the different understandings of this relationship—which we also trace from antiquity, based on the antagonism

between the artwork as lesser than nature (which it imitates to the point of deception) and the artwork as higher than nature (which it compensates for or corrects)—the prevailing opinion is that it always involves a sort of depiction, representation, or description of visible reality within the work.

By problematizing depiction or representation in the field of modern art, the question arises whether it is possible to interpret 20th-century abstract art as *mimesis* as well, despite its essentially anti-mimetic structure. Giulio Carlo Argan frames the problem between art and reality in a particular way as a problem of the relationship between art and nature, where this relationship is then reduced to the connection between a given schema (Nature), which can only be expressed within the boundaries of history, and creation or action (art) that can lead to a radical modification of the same (Argan, 1982, p. 47). Contemporary American art theorist Rosalind Krauss, on the other hand, sees the anti-mimetic, anti-narrative, anti-historical, and anti-developmental structure of the *grid* within abstract art as the key moment of departure from tradition—namely, the modern within modernism—pointing to a direct contact between art and the reality in which that art originates (Krauss, 1985, pp. 9-11). Their analyses overlap in certain parts, but while Argan emphasizes the social component of modernity in general, Krauss highlights the influence of structuralism and psychoanalytic interpretation. Both authors examine the concept of representation in an abstract work of art, pointing out a significant modification or expansion of the meaning of this concept: to represent something, besides meaning making those resemblances present, simultaneously means standing in place of something else that is merely absent, which implies reference, where resemblance becomes irrelevant.

From the very beginnings of reflections on art, which reach almost to the origins of philosophical thought in general, questions about art have also implied the problem of cognition, that is, reality. This is evidenced on the one hand by the ancient concept of *mimesis* itself, and on the other hand by Renaissance art, where *mimesis* manifests through a new, typically modern invention: the invention of perspective.

The first to reflect on the relationship between art and reality were the ancient Greeks, and the concept of *mimesis* is thus justifiably placed at the roots of both the philosophy of art and philosophy in general. Despite the conventional and most frequently translated term of "imitation" in the sense of replication, in Greek speech, the concept of *mimesis* had several meanings; imitation was not replication, especially not the replication of seen things. According to Tatarkiewicz, the original meaning of the concept of *mimesis* had no application in the visual arts, but primarily related to dance, mimicry, and music, and to them alone, since it arose together with the rituals and mysteries of the Dionysian cult (Tatarkiewicz, 1980, p. 264). Imitation was not a reproduction of external reality, but of the internal one, and in that sense, it was understood as expression rather than copying. Only later, when the term "imitation" shifted

from cultic speech into philosophical language, did it begin to mean the reproduction of the external world, of visible reality, or the appearance of things.

The dialectic of the relationship between art and reality became particularly prominent when it became clear that photographic and cinematographic processes—the result of this program of organizing the visible that originated in the *quattrocento*—represented reality with far greater precision and efficacy in terms of the "stabilization of the referent." In this way, the possibility opens up for doubling the effect of reality or the phantasms of realism. A large part of 20th-century art attempted to expose such realism as merely one of the "models of visuality," which is especially evident in abstract art.

Since the relationship between art and reality is based primarily on vision as such, what we significantly notice in an abstract work of art is that, at first glance, it does not correspond to visible reality in any way. Therefore, the question immediately arises as to how such a work of art relates to reality. The fact that it is impossible to approach visual art without perception indicates that a work of art must be perceived to realize its value at all. This fact indicates that a connection exists between it and the world of perception. Why else would it be necessary to create an object whose first and fundamental property is to be visible, if that object subsequently did not serve to clarify the problems inherent to what is visible? If we know that observing, looking, sight, and vision are directly connected to cognition, it is justifiable to ask what visual works of art tell us about the visible, even when those works of art are entirely abstract.

Argan addresses this problem by interpreting the period of classical art, i.e., the Italian Renaissance, in which art was understood as a positive cognition of the world, and observation was accepted as a comprehensive method that yields exhaustive experiences (Argan, 1982, p. 89). Furthermore, the belief that nature is the work of God and that all experience is contained within God fully justifies artistic creation based on experience. However, this premise—namely, that all experience is derived from the will that created the universe and governs it through providence—implies that all creation will always be an imitation, and that nothing can be done that is not already written in that plan laid out by providence. It is then that a new meaning of understanding art as *mimesis* is born, or at least posed. The process by which *mimesis* or representation is realized in this sense is not creation, but the imitation, the repetition by limited human means, of that divine, creative act from which, it is believed, the world emerged.

The Latest Concepts of the Definition of Art (21st Century)

What began as a doubt around 1900, and grew into a general rejection of the definition of art through beauty by the mid-20th century, has undergone a radical theoretical turn in the first two decades of the 21st century. If modern thought, as stated above, viewed a work of art in opposition to simple manual

labor or secular goals, the latest aesthetic theory completely erases these boundaries. The contemporary concept of art is no longer defined through the aesthetic properties of the object, nor even through the institutional framework that dominated the end of the last century, but through networking processes, digital ontology, and affective relations.

One of the key concepts dominating contemporary theory is relational aesthetics (*esthétique relationnelle*), theoretically formulated by Nicolas Bourriaud. According to this concept, art is no longer viewed as the creation of objects that document the author's subjective expression, but as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 14). The 21st-century artwork does not strive to be a picture that imitates reality or a grid that departs from it; it strives to be a space of interaction. This means that the concept of art has shifted from *what art is* (ontology) to *what art does* (pragmatics).

Parallel to this social turn, the influx of digital technologies, generative artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual spaces during the 2020s has re-actualized the problem of cognition, reality, and the visual model of reality about which Argan and Krauss wrote. The latest concepts of digital aesthetics introduce the term "post-digital art," where the clear distinction between the material object and digital code is lost. As Hito Steyerl observes, the contemporary image is no longer a representation of the world, but an active fragment of it circulating in a global network, transforming reality itself through algorithmic models (Steyerl, 2012, pp. 31–32). In this context, the ancient concept of *mimesis* gains a third, entirely new dimension: art no longer imitates nature (the classical model), nor does it create an autonomous world (the modernist model), but instead algorithmically generates a new, simulated reality that retroactively shapes human perception.

This radical shift in the understanding of art has led contemporary theorists to declare an era of "post-aesthetics." Boris Groys emphasizes that in contemporary society, the artwork loses its traditional aesthetic function and becomes a form of political or existential self-design. Groys points out: "Art today is no longer an object of contemplation for the spectator, but a production process that transforms the author himself and his surroundings" (Groys, 2008, p. 46). In this way, the evolutionary circle of the concept of art closes in a paradoxical manner: after centuries of struggle for autonomy and separation from the sphere of practical life (from Batteux to Schiller), art in the 21st century merges once again with everyday life, technology, and labor—but no longer as a craft (*techne*), but as a total media and existential environment.

In the context of domestic theoretical thought, these latest global processes are reflected through the re-examination of axiological and comparative models. If the comparison of phenomena from different categories was once bridged by

searching for a common denominator in the aesthetic structure (Panić, 1999, p. 55; Ranković, 1973, p. 214), contemporary theory demands a bridging between human and non-human creativity. Today, the concept of art must encompass hybrid forms that integrate biological, technological, and ecological facts, thereby expanding the scope of the content of human reality beyond the boundaries of anthropocentrism. Viewing artistic creations, even when they are entirely virtual or generated by code, still remains the foundation of cognition, but the brushstroke from the beginning of this paper is now replaced by the trace of the algorithm, leaving art historians with the task of defining new visual languages for the time to come.

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THE INCENTIVE SYSTEM AS A SOCIAL MECHANISM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNOVATION

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Abstract: The incentive system represents an important mechanism that influences the development and improvement of innovation in society. It includes various forms of motivation, including material, institutional, and social incentives, which guide individuals and organizations toward creative work and the creation of new solutions. From a social perspective, innovations are not only the result of individual ability, but also a product of the social environment that encourages cooperation, knowledge exchange, and creativity. Social recognition, educational institutions, and innovation culture play an important role in strengthening innovation potential. An effective incentive system contributes to the development of an innovation culture, increases motivation for research, and enables a wider range of people to participate in innovation processes. In this way, incentives directly influence the increase of competitiveness and overall socio-economic development.

Key words: Incentive systems, innovation development, social mechanisms, public policy.

Introduction

In modern conditions of rapid technological and social development, innovation represents one of the most important factors of progress, competitiveness, and sustainable development in any society. It enables the improvement of products, services, and processes, while also contributing to the overall quality of life. However, innovation does not emerge spontaneously; it is the result of a

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complex interaction between individuals, institutions, and the social environment that encourages and directs it.

In this context, the incentive system plays a key role as a social mechanism that motivates and guides people toward creative thinking and innovative action. Incentives can take various forms—material incentives such as financial rewards and investments in research, institutional support through educational and scientific organizations, as well as social incentives that include recognition, status, and affirmation within the community. From a social perspective, the importance of the incentive system is reflected in its ability to shape an innovation culture, encourage cooperation and knowledge exchange, and create an environment in which creativity and initiative are valued. In this way, innovation becomes the result of collective action rather than solely individual effort.

For these reasons, studying the incentive system as a social mechanism for the development of innovation provides a better understanding of the factors that influence a society's innovative potential and its overall socio-economic development.

In contemporary knowledge-based economies, innovation is increasingly recognized not only as a technological phenomenon but also as a social process embedded within networks of cooperation, trust, and institutional support. The ability of individuals and organizations to generate and implement new ideas depends largely on the broader social context, including access to education, research infrastructure, financial resources, and opportunities for collaboration. Consequently, societies that successfully establish supportive incentive systems are generally more capable of fostering entrepreneurial initiatives, technological advancement, and long-term economic growth.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of incentive systems is closely related to their capacity to balance individual motivation with collective societal goals. Well-designed incentive mechanisms encourage risk-taking, experimentation, and the pursuit of novel solutions while simultaneously promoting social responsibility and sustainable development. In this regard, innovation should be understood as a multidimensional process that encompasses economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Examining how incentive systems influence innovative behavior therefore provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which societies enhance their adaptive capacity, strengthen competitiveness, and respond to the challenges of an increasingly dynamic global environment.

The role of the incentive system in the innovation process – social aspect

Today's organizations increasingly expect employees to be innovative and creative, yet they often overlook a fundamental motivational question from the employee perspective: why should individuals engage in innovation and creativity in the first place? Recent research emphasizes that effective incentive

systems must address both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational drivers of innovative behavior (Anderson et al., 2022; Hewett et al., 2021).

The first key dimension of incentive systems involves rewarding the generation of new products, processes, and business solutions, shifting organizational focus from routine efficiency toward innovation-driven value creation. The second dimension concerns how incentives influence managerial attitudes toward risk-taking, experimentation, and openness to change, which are critical for sustaining innovation performance (D'Innocenzo et al., 2023; Kaur & Gupta, 2022).

Designing incentive systems that successfully encourage creativity and risk-taking is one of the most complex challenges in innovation management. While innovation is essential for long-term competitiveness and survival, short-term financial pressures often reduce willingness to invest in uncertain innovative outcomes. This tension between short-term efficiency and long-term innovation remains a central issue in organizational behavior research (Zhang et al., 2021; Bocken & Geradts, 2020).

Poorly structured incentive systems may lead to innovation failure or abandonment of ideas at early stages, often described as "innovation drop-off" or "idea attrition," where promising projects are discontinued due to fear of failure, lack of resources, or low confidence among employees (Foss et al., 2022; De Massis et al., 2023).

A key debate in the literature concerns the relative effectiveness of financial versus non-financial incentives. While monetary rewards remain important, recent studies suggest that recognition, autonomy, and meaningful work often have stronger long-term effects on creativity and innovation behavior (Ng & Feldman, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Many organizations implement structured reward systems such as annual innovation awards, which often function more as symbolic signals of strategic priorities than as direct motivational tools (Hassan et al., 2023).

More effective approaches integrate innovation into career development systems, where creative thinking becomes a core competency for advancement. In such systems, promotion and professional growth serve as long-term incentives that combine financial benefits with psychological satisfaction and self-actualization (Aguinis et al., 2021; Jiang & Messersmith, 2022).

Top management plays a decisive role in shaping organizational innovation culture by clearly communicating which behaviors are valued and rewarded. Leadership support is essential in creating an environment where experimentation, risk-taking, and idea generation are socially and structurally encouraged across all organizational levels (Khan et al., 2023; Ritala et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the most powerful incentive is the successful realization of innovation goals, as achievement reinforces desired behaviors and strengthens a continuous cycle of innovation within the organization (Anderson et al., 2022; Foss et al., 2022).

Another important aspect of innovation-oriented incentive systems is their ability to foster knowledge sharing and collaborative learning within organizations. Innovation rarely emerges from isolated individual efforts; rather, it is typically the result of interactions among employees with diverse expertise, experiences, and perspectives. Incentive mechanisms that reward collaboration, cross-functional teamwork, and knowledge exchange can significantly enhance an organization's innovative capacity. By encouraging employees to contribute ideas, share best practices, and participate in collective problem-solving processes, organizations create a more dynamic environment in which innovation becomes an integral part of everyday activities rather than an occasional outcome.

Moreover, contemporary organizations increasingly recognize that innovation incentives should be aligned with broader organizational values and strategic objectives. Sustainable innovation requires not only financial investment and managerial support but also a culture that promotes trust, psychological safety, and continuous learning. Employees are more likely to propose novel ideas and engage in creative activities when they perceive that mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning rather than as grounds for punishment. Consequently, successful incentive systems extend beyond traditional reward structures and contribute to the development of an organizational climate in which innovation is viewed as a shared responsibility and a key driver of long-term organizational success.

Social Aspect of the Reward System in Stimulating Innovation

From a social perspective, the reward system represents far more than a formal managerial instrument used to influence employee performance. It is also a crucial social mechanism that shapes behavior, interpersonal relationships, organizational values, and the overall culture of innovation within an organization. In this sense, reward systems determine how individuals perceive their role in the collective, how they interact with colleagues, and how strongly they identify with organizational goals and outcomes (Davila, Epstein, & Shelton, 2013).

Innovation is not driven exclusively by financial incentives, but is strongly influenced by social and psychological factors such as recognition, trust, communication, and a sense of belonging. Employees are often motivated by informal forms of appreciation, managerial support, and acknowledgment of effort, which can significantly enhance their engagement and creative potential. Therefore, reward systems contribute to the creation of a social environment in

which innovative behavior is not only expected but also socially reinforced and valued at all organizational levels (Amabile, 1996).

A key social dimension of reward systems is the balance between individual and collective motivation. While individual rewards can encourage personal achievement, innovation is frequently the result of teamwork, collaboration, and knowledge sharing among employees. For this reason, effective reward systems must be designed in a way that promotes cooperation and shared responsibility, rather than excessive competition that may weaken group cohesion and trust (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1997).

Intrinsic motivation—such as passion for work, curiosity, and the desire for self-development—is deeply influenced by the surrounding social environment. When employees feel respected, included, and valued within their organization, they are more likely to take initiative, share ideas, and engage in innovative activities. In this way, organizations function as social systems that can either stimulate or constrain innovative potential depending on their culture and internal relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Supportive organizational cultures characterized by autonomy, flexibility, and recognition further strengthen innovative behavior. Companies that successfully integrate these social elements create environments where creativity becomes a natural part of everyday work. A well-known example is companies that prioritize employee well-being and freedom in work organization, which often results in higher levels of innovation and productivity.

Ultimately, from a social standpoint, the reward system is not merely about distributing financial or material incentives, but about building a culture of trust, cooperation, and shared purpose. Such a system strengthens social cohesion within the organization and creates sustainable conditions for continuous innovation and long-term development (Davila et al., 2013).

Another important social function of reward systems lies in their ability to influence organizational identity and employees' perception of fairness. When rewards are distributed transparently and consistently, employees are more likely to perceive the organization as equitable and trustworthy, which strengthens commitment and organizational citizenship behavior. Conversely, perceived inequities in recognition and reward allocation may generate dissatisfaction, reduce motivation, and discourage participation in innovative activities. Therefore, the effectiveness of reward systems depends not only on the value of incentives but also on employees' perceptions of procedural and distributive justice within the organization.

In addition, reward systems contribute to the development of social norms that shape innovation-related behavior over time. Employees continuously observe which actions, attitudes, and achievements are rewarded and use this information to adjust their own behavior. As a result, reward mechanisms serve

as signals that communicate organizational priorities and expectations. When creativity, experimentation, and knowledge sharing are consistently recognized and rewarded, innovation gradually becomes embedded in the organizational culture. In this way, reward systems function not merely as instruments of motivation but also as social structures that influence collective behavior, reinforce organizational values, and support the long-term sustainability of innovation processes.

The impact of the reward system on performance within the social mechanism of innovation development

The relationship between reward systems and organizational performance is clearly visible in both successful and unsuccessful organizations. When an organization does not have clearly defined goals, innovation processes lack reference points, and as a result, the reward system cannot produce the expected effects. Therefore, goal setting is a crucial prerequisite, since it defines the desired state of the system that an organization aims to achieve from its current position (Drucker, 1954).

Careful definition of goals is not a waste of time or resources, but rather a necessary foundation for effective performance management. Once clear objectives are established and an efficient reward system is designed, measuring organizational performance makes the connection between rewards and results much more transparent. In this way, the reward system becomes a key social mechanism that aligns individual behavior with organizational innovation goals.

An effective reward system should define an appropriate level of compensation for employees while remaining flexible and economically sustainable. Modern organizations use a wide range of reward methods, including bonuses, salary increases, stock ownership, promotions, and other forms of incentives. Regardless of the form, all compensation systems are based on four key components: expected payment level, the relationship between rewards and performance, timing of reward delivery, and the method of compensation distribution (Milkovich, Newman, & Gerhart, 2014).

The expected level of payment represents the market value of performed work or completed tasks. However, determining this value can be complex, as it depends on factors such as education, skills, competencies, and personal characteristics of employees. The second component refers to the strength of the relationship between rewards and performance. It is important that reward systems clearly differentiate between levels of performance, avoiding situations where minimal improvements are rewarded equally to significant achievements. Most modern systems are linear or close to linear, meaning that rewards are proportional to performance and continuously encourage improvement (Gerhart & Fang, 2015).

Timing of reward distribution is also a crucial factor for both organizations and employees. One approach is long-term reward systems designed to retain key employees through delayed compensation mechanisms, such as stock vesting periods. This ensures long-term commitment and alignment with organizational goals. The final component is the form of compensation delivery, which is typically either cash-based rewards, such as bonuses, or equity-based rewards, such as shares. Cash incentives are more suitable for short-term, measurable results, while equity-based rewards are more effective for long-term innovative projects whose outcomes are realized over time.

Only after defining clear goals and establishing a structured reward system can organizations effectively measure performance and analyze the impact of rewards on outcomes. In this context, goals serve as reference points for both designing reward systems and evaluating performance. This creates a direct and proportional relationship between rewards and organizational performance, which becomes a critical indicator of long-term growth and innovation capacity (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

Results and Discussion

Recent research results indicate that reward systems have a significant impact on organizational performance, particularly when viewed through the lens of innovation development and social dynamics within organizations. Effective reward systems positively influence employee motivation, creativity, and willingness to engage in innovative activities, which directly contributes to improved overall organizational performance (Amabile, 1996).

The discussion of contemporary theoretical approaches shows that employee motivation does not depend solely on financial incentives, but also on intrinsic factors such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the organization (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this regard, reward systems that integrate non-financial incentives—such as recognition and opportunities for professional development—tend to have a stronger and more sustainable effect on innovative behavior.

Expectancy theory further suggests that employees evaluate the relationship between effort, performance, and rewards, making a clear and transparent reward system essential for achieving high performance levels (Vroom, 1964). When employees perceive a strong link between their performance and rewards, they are more motivated to improve their work and contribute to innovation processes.

Empirical studies also confirm that organizations combining financial and non-financial incentives achieve better results in terms of innovation and efficiency. For instance, systems that include long-term incentives such as stock options or career advancement opportunities foster higher commitment levels and reduce employee turnover (Gerhart & Fang, 2015).

From a social perspective, reward systems contribute to the development of an organizational culture that promotes collaboration, knowledge sharing, and risk-taking, which are essential components of the innovation process. Organizations that cultivate such a culture tend to achieve more stable growth and greater adaptability to environmental changes (Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2001).

Overall, it can be concluded that reward systems have both direct and indirect effects on organizational performance. Their effectiveness depends on the balance between financial and non-financial incentives, as well as on how well they are integrated into the broader social and organizational context of innovation.

Conclusion

The reward system represents a key social mechanism that influences organizational performance and innovation development. Its effectiveness depends primarily on clearly defined goals, since they serve as reference points for both designing incentives and evaluating achieved results. Without well-established objectives, reward systems lose their strategic purpose and fail to generate the expected impact on innovation processes and overall performance.

A well-structured reward system aligns employee behavior with organizational goals by linking performance outcomes with appropriate forms of compensation. These may include financial incentives such as bonuses and salary increases, as well as non-financial rewards such as recognition, promotions, and equity participation. Each form of reward has its specific role depending on whether the organization aims to encourage short-term efficiency or long-term innovative development.

From a social perspective, reward systems also shape organizational culture by influencing motivation, collaboration, and the willingness of employees to engage in creative and risk-taking activities. When employees perceive that their contributions are fairly recognized, their intrinsic motivation increases, leading to higher levels of engagement and innovation.

Ultimately, the impact of the reward system on performance within the social mechanism of innovation development is direct and proportional when properly designed and implemented. Therefore, it represents a crucial factor in ensuring long-term organizational growth, competitiveness, and sustainable innovation capacity.

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DOBRIVOJE JOVANOVIĆ, *ELECTIONS IN THE JAGODINA AND ĆUPRIJA DISTRICTS, 1882–1903,* SELF-PUBLISHED, JAGODINA, 2025, 214 PP.

Ninoslav Stanojlović[15]

The political history of Serbia from the proclamation of the Kingdom in 1882 to the May Coup of 1903 was marked by numerous turbulent and often decisive events. These included the formation of organized political parties, the Timok Rebellion, the Serbian-Bulgarian War, the Constitution of 1888, the abdication of King Milan Obrenović, the coup d'état of 1893, the Octroic Constitution of 1901, and frequent changes of government. These developments were accompanied by numerous parliamentary elections (1883, 1884, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1893, 1895, 1897, 1898, and 1901), not including repeated or supplementary elections held in certain constituencies. Parliamentary elections and other phenomena that characterized these important historical moments within the specified period and territory are thoroughly and convincingly documented in the monograph under review, authored by the distinguished, prolific, and dedicated historian of Jagodina, Pomoravlje, and Serbia, M.A. Dobrivoje Jovanović (Jagodina, 1952), retired archival counselor. Owing to his remarkable erudition, professional expertise, and evident research skill, the author has succeeded in producing yet another exemplary scholarly study.

Parliamentary life in nineteenth-century Serbia, examined from the perspective of a particular region and especially through the organization and conduct of elections, as well as through the activities of elected representatives within the highest legislative body, has rarely been the subject of dedicated research, apart from a few smaller studies. Consequently, this book may also be viewed as a continuation of a pioneering research endeavor initiated three years earlier through the author's documentary monograph on the same topic, covering the period from 1804 to 1882 and focusing on the regions of Pomoravlje, Resava, and Levač, that is, the former Jagodina and Ćuprija districts.

This monograph, devoted to the National Assemblies of the Kingdom of Serbia up to 1903 and to the participation of representatives from the Jagodina and Ćuprija districts during three decades of parliamentary history, extends over more than 200 pages. It has been prepared professionally and is based on extensive use of primary archival sources, relevant scholarly literature, and

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contemporary newspapers. The study successfully fulfills the author's considerable effort and research commitment, illuminating the chosen topic while also addressing certain assemblies and the role of particular individuals whose activities have received little or no attention in Serbian historiography.

The monograph is divided into approximately ten chapters, most of which are organized chronologically according to the year in which elections were held. Through these chapters, the author highlights numerous distinctive features of the development of parliamentary life in Serbia. He examines the fact that the convocation, opening, adjournment, extension, and dissolution of the Assembly were controlled by the monarch, who, until the Constitution of 1888, also appointed its president and vice presidents. The book provides valuable information on the procedures and organization of parliamentary elections at all levels of electoral administration, from districts and counties to municipalities. It emphasizes that voting rights were granted to every adult Serbian male over the age of twenty-one who paid taxes, while women, itinerant Roma, convicted persons, and soldiers in active service were excluded. The Constitution of 1888 introduced secret voting and abolished the practice established by the Constitution of 1869, according to which one deputy appointed by the monarch was added for every three deputies elected by the people. Parliamentary sessions were often highly turbulent, marked by verbal and physical confrontations, although the revocation of parliamentary mandates remained relatively rare. Political parties—the Liberal Party, the Progressive Party, and the People's Radical Party, formally established in the early 1880s, as well as the Independent Radical Party founded in 1901—rapidly became genuine participants in the struggle for political power.

The study provides numerous interesting and valuable insights into political life in the Jagodina and Ćuprija districts, which, following the Constitution of 1888 and the administrative-territorial reorganization of the Kingdom of Serbia two years later, were merged into the Morava District. The author examines the establishment of local committees of all major political parties active in the region, the organization and conduct of elections, voter turnout, election results, and various irregularities that accompanied the electoral process. He also presents detailed information about elected representatives and their activities and speeches within the National Assembly. Particularly valuable are the excerpts and complete records of parliamentary interventions, proposals, criticisms, comments, and suggestions made by deputies from these regions during debates on important issues, including the so-called Resava Affair of 1887 and the decision in 1890 to designate Ćuprija rather than Jagodina as the administrative center of the newly established Morava District.

Special attention is devoted to the activities of some of the most prominent parliamentary representatives from Pomoravlje, Resava, and Levač. These include the Radical politicians Dimitrije Katić of Crkvenac, Milija Milovanović of Bačina, Tasa Đikić, Milan Radenković, and Mihajlo Kosovljanin of

Jagodina, Sima Perić of Rekovac; the Progressives Neša Milenković of Jovac, Visarion Nikolić of Jagodina, and Milosav Petrović of Svilajnac; the Liberal Isak Cvetković of Svilajnac; and the Independent Radicals Mita Isaković of Svilajnac, Milosav Radojković and Sima Katić of Ćuprija, Dragutin Pećić of Jagodina, and many others. The author also notes the intriguing phenomenon that fathers and sons were frequently aligned with opposing political camps, as in the cases of Jovan Kosovljanin (Liberal) and his son Mihajlo Kosovljanin (Radical), Isak Cvetković (Liberal) and his son Dimitrije "Mita" Isaković (Independent Radical), and Dimitrije Katić (Radical) and his son Sima Katić (Independent Radical).

The latest book by the diligent historian Dobrivoje Jovanović represents a valuable contribution to contemporary Serbian historiography. Like several of his previous works, it was published independently and in an exceptionally limited edition of only ten copies. The volume contains approximately ten selected photographs and concludes with a comprehensive list of archival sources, published documents, and scholarly literature. As such, it constitutes an important reference work for future studies of parliamentary history, political culture, and electoral processes in Serbia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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